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978-0-521-89568-2 - The Cambridge Companion to War Writing

Edited by Kate McLoughlin

Excerpt

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KATE McLOUGHLIN

Introduction

How war is written about concerns every individual. It is vital that techniques and tools are found to represent war accurately: such representation might not stop future wars, but it can at least keep the record straight. It is equally vital that techniques and tools are found to dismantle accounts of war that are distorting or deceitful: the process of dismantling might do nothing to prevent conflict, but it can at least lay bare the nature of what is at stake. In identifying these techniques and tools, literary scholarship has a unique opportunity – that of constituting an act of good citizenship.

Less grandiosely, the study of war writing is a source of enhanced literary insight. War reverberates through literature. It is, Ernest Hemingway wrote in a letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald, the writer's "best subject," as it "groups the maximum of material and speeds up the action and brings out all sorts of stuff that normally you have to wait a lifetime to get."¹ War demands the writer's best skills at evocation, not least because of duties owed to the wounded and the dead. Certain literary movements and genres cannot be understood without reference to conflict – modernism and the First World War, romanticism and the French Revolution, epic and the wars of antiquity, to give a few examples – and appreciating the workings of war literature is also a matter of comprehending their wider literary context.

A principle underlying this *Companion* is that all wars are different and also the same. Wars, and writings about them, function a little like the literary canon: influences work backwards as well as forwards; omissions are both inevitable and intriguing; predecessors and successors have to be read – but within reasonable limits. What makes wars differ from one another are factors such as historical moment, *casus belli*, political and cultural disposition of the sides involved, type of terrain, professional or conscripted armies, weapons technology, and so on. These variables ensure that each conflict has its own poesis (and, potentially, genre: in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, think of the First World War and the lyric poem, the Second World War and the epic novel, Vietnam and the movie, the "war on terror"

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and the blog). The chapters listed under “Poetics” are period-based and attempt to show what is distinct about the war writing of that time. Further divisions could be made – premodern, modern, and postmodern; pre- and postindustrial, for instance – and, indeed, these and other categories emerge in the course of the “Poetics” chapters. These chapters are confined to British and American war writing (“British,” pre- and even post-1707, is a problematic term, but is intended here to refer to the island of Great Britain; “American” is equally sensitive, but is intended to refer to the United States and her preceding colonies). In an ideal world, the scope would be even greater, but addressing war writing from every nation and culture would make for a cumbersome *Companion* and the body of literature that is included here has both the centripetal cohesion and the centrifugal outreach to foster fruitful study.

The chapters listed under “Themes” and “Influences” reflect the fact that wars and writings about wars all share common features. “The idea of war” is important to consider as a term-defining starting point. There follow chapters on the words, people, and places of war – categories that must be considered every time conflict is represented. The chapter on war in print journalism identifies the issues that come into play whenever news is brought of war: how closely involved should the war reporter be? How is credibility established? Can and should “objectivity” be achieved? What difference can journalism make? The role of women in war is another hugely important subject. Instead of being confined to a single chapter, women’s war writing is addressed throughout the volume, as is writing about women and their lot in wartime. The two “Influences” chapters are biblical and classical. The Judeo-Christian Bible is not the only religious text and Greece and Rome are not the only ancient cultures to influence British and American writing about conflict. But they are the major ancient influences and it is important to be able to identify their traces. Where other religious discourses permeate the representation of war, this is noted in the course of the volume.

The *Companion*’s principle of “different and the same” means that a student of any war writer or war literature will have immediate access to an authoritative account of the war writing of the relevant period *and* will also be able to read lucid and manageable essays about preceding and succeeding periods and applicable themes and influences. A student working on a Victorian war writer, for instance, may quickly turn to the chapter on medieval war writing to find out about chivalry in its original context and then to the chapters on First World War writings to discover what happened to chivalric notions after 1914. And, while it forms a “one-stop-shop” for a student working on any aspect of British or American war writing, the volume also provides more advanced scholars and specialists with instant recourse to

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the latest thinking by leading experts on war representation, period-based or otherwise, and stimuli for further research.

From what has already been said in this Introduction, it should be evident that writing about war, and writing about that writing, is fraught with possibilities of offending sensibilities, whether by omission or inclusion, and particularly by nomenclature. Every attempt has been made in this volume to avoid such offence, most often by remarking and explaining the nature of any controversy. But, even at the risk of offending, war, for the reasons given at the start, must be written about – and that writing must be written about. Discomfort is only to be expected. Every student of war writing, too, must be aware of the larger-than-usual gap between representation and referent. Five minutes in battle could teach more than any number of texts. Whenever war is written or read about, it is also actually happening and this must give both urgency and humility to our reading and writing.

NOTES

1. Ernest Hemingway, *Ernest Hemingway Selected Letters 1917–1961*, ed. Carlos Baker (London: Granada, 1981), 176.

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PART ONE

Themes

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I

HEW STRACHAN

The idea of war

The most sustained attempt to understand the nature of war, Carl von Clausewitz's *On War*, posthumously published in 1832, opens with a chapter entitled "What is war?" It immediately proceeds to a normative definition. Having described war as a duel, albeit on a larger scale, Clausewitz (1780–1831) concludes with a sentence which in most editions of the text is italicized: "War is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will."¹

For Clausewitz, therefore, the central elements of war are reciprocity and the use of force. It takes at least two to wage a war. The one-sided application of violence is not war, and the coercion of another without the use of force is also not war. In practice there may be qualifications to these norms. NATO's attack on Serbia during the Kosovo campaign in 1999 was, to all intents and purposes, a one-sided use of force, with minimal – if any – reciprocity, and the Cold War was waged by threatening the use of force, not by its actual employment (and that may be a very good reason for concluding that it was not in fact a war).

Significantly, nothing in this characterization of war is "Clausewitzian" in the sense used by contemporary journalism. So used, the epithet refers to a view of war as an instrument of policy, a view which refers to war's potential utility, not to its nature. Of course, if a state has recourse to war, its reasons can be called political. That is true even when the decision to fight is more instinctive than deliberative – for example, a response to invasion – and the war not one of choice but of survival. But once a war has begun, its capacity to deliver on the declared objectives of one side or the other is constrained by the progression of the war itself. That is particularly likely to be the case when the war is protracted, and when the original parties to the conflict are joined by others with differing objectives. So policy becomes more often the tool of war, or at least its reflection, than its guiding instrument. In the English-language tradition these self-evident truths lost their purchase in the age of so-called "total war."

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Towards the end of the First World War, the French government, inspired by Georges Clemenceau, appointed prime minister in November 1917, deployed the rhetoric of the French Revolution to reject any talk of compromise with the enemy and to remobilize the nation in its pursuit of victory. After the war was over the phrase “total war” acquired a currency in English and German as well as French. It was a language of warning as well as of commitment – a reminder in the interwar years of how destructive European warfare had become. The Second World War proved that the admonition was warranted. Furthermore, that war revealed more starkly than its predecessor the corollary of true national mobilization. If war required the sustained effort of the nation’s entire population, civilian as well as military, then those who had hitherto been regarded as noncombatants could no longer be exempted from attack (a corollary which increased the number of potential war writers with first-hand experience). The principle of reciprocity, as well as the justification of military necessity, demanded the bombing of cities and the coercion of labor. The Nazis’ extermination camps and the Soviet gulags needed the background of total war to rationalize the horrors of their genocidal policies, even to their perpetrators. The result was a war of appalling destructiveness, particularly for Germany, the Soviet Union, and Japan.

In 1945, the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki suggested that any future war would be shaped by similar considerations, by full national mobilization, intellectual and cultural as well as economic and social. Moreover, the air forces of the United States imagined that they now had the weapon to guarantee the effectiveness of aerial bombardment as an independent war-winner. But some civilian strategists argued that the atomic bomb represented not a continuity but a revolution. The threat of total war had now reached its culmination and they contended that the function of strategy was less the waging of war, and more the use of the fear of its being waged to deter war. Thus thinking about war became shaped less by its conduct and more by its political utility, not least because that seemed to be the best way to limit it, and even to prevent it altogether.

The subordination of war to policy brought the destructiveness of war back under control, by setting limits which would be observed not because of moral or legal constraints, but because they would reflect the self-interest of the belligerents. And so a narrative was constructed which made sense of war by defining it as a state activity pursued to fulfill the ends of policy. It was a construction put together by modern historians, certainly with one eye cocked to current agendas, but who were able to trace its intellectual origins to Machiavelli and Hobbes. Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) linked changes in military organization and tactics (both subjects which he addressed in their own right) to political development. “A ruler,” he wrote

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[More information](#)

The idea of war

in *The Prince* (1532), “should have no other objective and no other concern, nor occupy himself with anything else except war and its methods and practices.” And, he went on, “if rulers concern themselves more with the refinements of life than with military matters, they lose power. The main reason why they lose it is their neglect of the art of war; and being proficient in this art is what enables one to gain power.”² Clausewitz read Machiavelli and was profoundly influenced by him. It is not clear whether he ever read the work of Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), although in the English-language tradition Hobbes – thanks not only to his arguments but also to his prose style – has had a far greater influence on thinking about the relationship between war and the state.

Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, published in 1651, was a product of what international relations theorists have come to call the pre-Westphalian order. In the first half of the seventeenth century, Europe was ravaged by wars waged not only to define the state and the power of its government, but also to determine its religious confession. Hobbes lived through the British Civil Wars (1638–52), interlinked conflicts in England, Ireland, and Scotland, which collectively resulted in a loss of life in relation to the population comparable with that of the First World War. But the suffering of the British Isles was secondary to that of central Europe in the Thirty Years War (1618–48), a war, or rather a sequence of wars, which for Germans defined the awfulness of war until the First World War. The peace of Westphalia, which ended the war in 1648, did not mark such a neat break between wars of religion and wars waged solely by sovereign states as standard generalizations suggest, but the point remains that for Hobbes, the wars of his own lifetime, fought by weak states and sustained by private military companies, supported his construct that man in a state of nature was predisposed to violence. By ceding power to a sovereign government, and conferring on it the monopoly of force, man gave himself the best chance of living in a state of domestic peace.

The view that the resort to war is the monopoly of the state, and that warfare is therefore solely a feature of international relations, leaves far too much out of the account. In particular it neglects the fact that many wars before 1648, and not a few since, can best be characterized as civil wars. Conflicts conducted to define the state, whether in terms of religion, ethnicity, or governmental structure, have tended to be fought with a brutality and perseverance even greater than those evident in the interstate wars of early modern and modern Europe, at least until the wars of the first half of the twentieth century. But once the definition of war encompasses civil war, it encounters challenges sufficiently great to generate doubts about what the idea of war is.

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[More information](#)

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The British Civil Wars created a legacy for war writing in Britain, not just through Hobbes but also through constitutionalist fears of military government, manifested in Cromwell's use of major generals to administer the country in 1655. It was a legacy shared by the colonials of North America. But for them, too, civil war defined the nation, first through their rebellion against the British government in 1775, and then through the war between the Union and the Confederate states (1861–65). The American Civil War was waged in accordance with the expectations of morality and customary law established for interstate war in Europe. In 1863, the Union adopted the Lieber Code to ensure that the conventions observed with respect to the enemy conformed to the principles of the just war tradition. The Confederate states were rebels, and could have been treated as such, for all that their armies wore a recognizable uniform and their government provided a recognizable political authority. By contrast, in Europe the revolutions of 1848, like those of 1830, were not treated as wars. The revolutionaries produced lists of political demands; they formed assemblies to articulate and debate those demands; and they created uniformed and organized bodies to keep order. In some cases, as in Hungary and Piedmont, the revolutions also contained a clear cultural, linguistic, and national framework. But when the sovereigns of Europe sent in their armies to reimpose order, they used them quite explicitly as counterrevolutionary forces. The viciousness of the repression was prompted by fear, a mood wonderfully captured by Stendhal in *The Charterhouse of Parma* (1839). The monarchs knew, from the experience of France in 1789, that revolution in one country could lead not just to terror within its own frontiers, but also to more general war throughout Europe. The conflation of war and revolution was precisely what had made the Napoleonic Wars approximate to what Clausewitz (in another normative statement) called “absolute war.”

It suited nineteenth-century governments, at least within Europe, to work with narrow definitions of war: indeed British military commentators used the phrase “civilized warfare” to distinguish war between recognized nation states from war outside Europe in the pursuit of colonial objectives. To be sure, the latter could fit into a romantic image of war, a combination of travelogue, big-game hunting, and exploration, with a little fighting to spice up the tale, but the reality was often much more brutal than its more fanciful depictions. The native Americans on the western frontier of the United States or the Pathans of the north-west frontier of India did not obey the conventions of war as embodied in the Lieber Code. The refusal to take prisoners and the ritualized mutilation of bodies were capable of generating a cycle of atrocity that was anything but “civilized.” The deaths of British women and children at the hands of the sepoys during the “Indian Mutiny” of 1857, luridly

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The idea of war

reported in the press, were matched by the degradation of captured mutineers, who were then executed by being blown away by artillery. Punitive expeditions conducted against those reluctant to accept colonial rule had the trappings of later “total war,” as they targeted the economic infrastructures of tribal societies and rejected distinctions between warriors and the families whose economic contributions sustained them in the field.

In other words, wars were fought, not only outside Europe and not only in the nineteenth century, which did not obey the customary conventions of war, and which were often not dignified with the name of war. Terrorism and violence could prevail in situations which, while not exactly peaceful, would still be deemed not to be wars in any normative sense. This is not the case today. Since the end of the Cold War in 1989, and even more since the attacks on the twin towers in New York on September 11, 2001, the term “war” has been broadened to embrace many more levels of violence, including its use for purposes that are not strictly political. The United States’s adoption of the “global war on terror” is one such oxymoronic usage – a war waged against a means of fighting rather than for an identifiable purpose. Significantly, international lawyers have preferred to drop the word “war” altogether, and to speak of “armed conflict.”

For the idea of war to have purchase, war cannot be defined just by the use of force. It is important, for example, to sustain the distinction between war and crime. War is not the same as murder, for all the radical slogans to the contrary. Crime, like revolution, can exploit the opportunity that war creates: by weakening government or by channeling governmental efforts into areas other than policing, war provides criminals with an invitation to profiteer or pillage, or to murder or rape, with greater impunity. But that does not mean that war and crime are synonymous (or that war is a crime). To be sure, the use of violence is a characteristic of war. But so too is the fact that war is engaged in by groups, not by individuals. Groups that are not nations or states can engage in something that we can recognize to be a war, not least because their objectives may still be political. Insurgents committed to ejecting an invader or a colonial occupier are cases in point, and the 1977 additional protocols of the Geneva Convention acknowledged as much.

Identifying the purpose in fighting is therefore one of the ways in which we give coherence to the idea of war, and it needs to go beyond the needs of the individual, unless that individual is a monarch claiming to represent the nation over which he or she is sovereign. However, for most of those engaged in war, including the soldiers of a despot fighting solely because they are acting in conformity with his or her will, war has an inwardness that can elude international relations theory. It has its own dynamic and is best understood as a free-standing phenomenon.

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[More information](#)

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War understood in this way, free of utilitarian assumptions, has two contrasting ideas at its heart. The first derives precisely from the notion of reciprocity, and the unpredictability that that injects into its course. This nonlinear progression is the consequence of the interaction of human agency, but war is also subject to changes in weather, the effect of topography, and the function of luck and chance. Clausewitz spoke of the “friction” of war;³ others have used words like “fog” and “chaos.” The word “war” itself captures these elements. It is derived from the old Germanic term *werra* (confusion, strife), a word which also gives *guerre* in French and *guerra* in Spanish and Italian.

The challenge for commanders is to master this chaotic environment, not to be overwhelmed by the bloodiness of the battlefield, and still to try to impose order and direction – a challenge also encountered by any writer attempting to describe war. The Latin word for war, *bellum*, carries these connotations of order, and significantly also belongs in the realm of law. The tool which the general uses to direct the war is strategy, which Clausewitz described as the use of the battle for the purposes of the war. For him and his generation, the word “strategy” was a comparatively recent coining – the product of the Enlightenment rather than of any classical inheritance, for all its Greek derivation. Today, strategy is used much more loosely and much more widely, often denoting policy itself. But it was strategy that gave us the key concepts by which we understand action in war, and by which victory, at least in the circumscribed sense of military victory, could be defined. Napoleon tried to engage and so pin his opponents from the front and sent forces to envelop their flanks and even encircle their main force. This use of maneuver to achieve decisive battle remained the gold standard of operational excellence at least until the First Gulf War of 1990–91. But many critics, including Clausewitz and his equally influential contemporary, Antoine-Henri Jomini (1779–1869), were doubtful – firstly, because the strategy of envelopment was risky as it required the division, not the concentration, of forces, and secondly, because most commanders lacked the qualities of Napoleon. Clausewitz noticed the similarities between the organized armies of the great powers and the tendency of battles to become prolonged firefights between evenly matched forces – a phenomenon which in the First World War would be called attrition, where success came to be measured not by the effects of maneuver but by the balance of manpower and relative losses.

Jomini’s influence in the nineteenth century was greater than Clausewitz’s precisely because he set out less to understand war than to provide a guide for commanders as to how to wage it. That didactic purpose has motivated the bulk of writing on war: the dominant aim in the theoretical literature on war has been to provide a shortcut to victory. Sun-tzu’s *The Art of War*, a product