INTRODUCTION

America's Great War at One Hundred (and Counting)

Tim Dayton and Mark W. Van Wienen

0.1 War Guilt, Disillusion, and Beyond

The First World War began the transformation of American society that culminated in the New Deal, the midcentury *Pax Americana*, and its ironic accompaniment, the Cold War, thus decisively affecting American and world history. Such is the consensus established by historians including David Kennedy, Jennifer Keene, and Adam Tooze and further elaborated upon by a number of the historians featured in this collection. As the literary and other cultural critics gathered here also variously attest, the social transformation was accompanied by fundamental shifts in aesthetics. Yet approaching these points of consensus itself involved a process of contention and transformation – which, indeed, remains ongoing in the essays collected in this volume.

Just a glance at representative literary anthologies reveals something of the artistic break. Whereas any edition of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* will attest that Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson were the major American poets of the nineteenth century, E. C. Stedman's *An American Anthology 1787–1900* (1900) assumes the superiority of the Fireside Poets (Bryant, Longfellow, Lowell, Holmes, and Whittier) along with their closed forms and genial philosophy. Jessie B. Rittenhouse's *Little Book of Modern Verse* (1917), standing at the very rim of the volcano, as it were, includes a number of the poets who feature in this volume – Joyce Kilmer, Vachel Lindsay, Percy MacKaye, Edith Thomas, George Sylvester Viereck – but precious few now considered among the leading American modernists: no T. S. Eliot, Marianne Moore, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, or William Carlos Williams, although all were in print by 1917. This dramatic changing of the literary guard had multiple causes, of course, but the First World War unmistakably provided the fulcrum in a cultural

conflict pitting the defenders of the "traditional literary culture" (May 6) – who overwhelmingly rallied in favor of American intervention – against an insurgent modern literary culture. The cultural insurgency predated the war, but the war and the immediate postwar years both shaped its realized form and set up the conditions whereby its representatives would be more likely to survive, and ultimately would largely guide, the culling process that is canonization.

This insurgent culture was powerfully associated with what became the dominant understanding of American Great War literature and culture, the "disillusionment," a term first applied to the war, so far as we know, in Randolph Bourne's "War Diary" published in 1917 (323). As used in the postwar period, disillusionment refers to the experience of American writers who typically had some direct experience of the war, either as soldiers or as noncombatant war workers, often ambulance drivers. Writers such as John Dos Passos, E. E. Cummings, and Ernest Hemingway bore witness to the reality of the war and its failure to conform to the high-minded ideals of President Woodrow Wilson and the propaganda campaign used to justify US intervention. This perspective led not only to a specific reaction against the war but also to a more pervasive quality of irony, skepticism, and distrust of the political and public realms that, it was held, characterized literary modernism generally.

This is not to say that the politics of modernism as it emerged from the Great War was ever a stable or settled matter. Malcolm Cowley's *Exile's Return* recognizes pre- as well as postwar rebellion, arguing that in the epicenter of the prewar rebellion, Greenwich Village, two distinguishable types intermingled: aesthetic and political. The aesthetic rebellion, against "puritanism"– the American version of Victorianism, not seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Puritanism – proved compatible with the war. Political rebellion did not (Cowley, *Exile's* 66–67). After the war it became clear that aesthetic rebellion was also broadly compatible with the needs of the developing capitalist economy. It carried the day (65). Reviewed unfavorably and selling poorly, *Exile's Return* did not carry the day when published in 1934, but a revised edition in 1951 was avidly received, and with it, Cowley's vision of the postwar era (Cott 72), which disputed the term "disillusioned" but not its chief characteristics, irony and ambivalence (Dayton 223–225).

Cowley assessed the impact of the war from the perspective of a participant-observer: he had served as an ambulance driver (Cott 53). Frederick J. Hoffman, eleven years younger, wrote from the perspective of a literary critic and historian (Tanksley 1). Drawing on wide reading,

including *Exile's Return*, Hoffman saw the war as driving a wedge between older writers such as Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, and Dorothy Canfield Fisher on one side and younger writers like Dos Passos, Cummings, Hemingway, and Harry Crosby on the other. The writing of the older writers "served primarily to show how far the traditional evaluation of the war was from the view of the 1920s" (Hoffmann 50). For the younger writers the traditional culture and its values failed to provide a meaning-giving framework to events, which tended toward chaos or worse. This view of intergenerational rupture was practically codified in Henry F. May's *The End of American Innocence* (1959). By 1970 Stanley Cooperman's *World War I and the American Novel* could take disillusionment largely for granted. Although focused on British writers, Paul Fussell's landmark *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975) largely confirmed this disillusionment narrative and the literary canon it generated.

The historiography of the First World War, centered on the war's origins, followed a trajectory similar to the disillusionment narrative in literary studies. US government accounts of the war placed sole responsibility for the war on the Central Powers, thus justifying American intervention. In the immediate aftermath of the war, prominent historian Carlton J. H. Hayes cites as an authority the Committee on Public Information – the US government's propaganda bureau (207) – and hails Wilson's address to Congress requesting a declaration of war as "one of the greatest of America's famous documents" (217). But by 1920 Sidney Bradshaw Fay had begun presenting the available evidence, already considerable, showing that responsibility for the war did not lie solely with Germany and its allies, finding Serbia and Russia as well as Austria-Hungary to be most culpable. Furthermore, beyond the immediate causes of the war, Fay discerned crucial "underlying causes" (32), which Hayes also was aware of but tended to associate in practice with Germany alone.

Fay – and less temperate figures such as H. E. Barnes, who saw the Triple Entente, not Germany, as the instigators of the war – would not hold the field uncontested, with Bernadotte Everly Schmitt maintaining the greater culpability of Germany (Mombauer 86–88, 102). But the wartime consensus was broken, and the sense that the United States had been duped, whether by the Allies, by the president and his cohorts, or by a combination of the two, was well established. In historical writing the dismantling of the wartime vision of the conflict and in literature the disillusionment narrative were firmly established by the end of the 1920s.

Historians continued to debate the origins of the war: skepticism regarding German responsibility was never dominant to the same extent as was disillusionment in literary studies. Indeed, only in the 1990s did literary critics and cultural historians refocus attention on the American literature of the war, exploring writing that lies outside the disillusionment narrative or approaching the texts of the disillusionment narrative from other angles. David Kennedy's *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* was crucial, opening up multiple new lines of inquiry. By validating the home front as a critical theater, Kennedy drew attention to the political, legal, and cultural frameworks that had to be established within the United States before any soldiers would be sent "over there"; this emphasis immediately threw into relief the ideological work necessary to prime the nation for war and the measures necessary to suppress dissent. In Mark Van Wienen's *Partisans and Poets* (1997) and Patrick J. Quinn's *The Conning of America* (2001), focused on popular fiction, the question of how the United States got into the war – and how literature aided (or resisted) that process – became central, while what writers thought of it afterward became peripheral.

Emphasis on the social and political impacts of the war, moreover, attended to the dilemmas of US minority populations, including African Americans, who were asked to fight in a segregated army, as well as Irish and German Americans with mixed attitudes about a US alliance with the Triple Entente. Women's roles in the US mobilization were also given their due, as in Jennifer Haytock's *At Home at War* (2003), which not only reexamined the disillusionment narrative via gender politics but also revised attitudes toward the supposed guardians of the "traditional culture," such as Cather and Wharton. As Haytock shows in her chapter in this collection, "Americans in France," both civilian and uniformed writers who sided with France often offered nuanced, complex accounts of their commitments.

Wider challenges to the literary canon in the 1980s and 1990s helped open the field of Great War literary studies; once the lid came off, the amount of material to be studied was vast: novels, poetry, personal narratives, essays, plays, films, speeches. Among the important discoveries made were of many American soldiers who were, or became, poets, playwrights, novelists, memoirists, and painters. Soldiers who became novelists feature in Steven Trout's chapter on "The Veteran" in this volume but also comprise the backbone of Scott Emmert's essay on "Fiction" and David Davis's "In the South." Meanwhile parallel developments in other disciplines, especially art and design, produced further revelations: David Lubin – featured in our

chapter on "Art and Illustration" – has elsewhere drawn attention to Claggett Wilson, a military veteran and important modernist painter; Horace Pippin, an African American veteran and outsider artist; and Anna Coleman Ladd, who headed a studio designing cosmetic masks for disfigured veterans (see Lubin, *Grand Illusions*). In "Monuments and Memorials" Mark Levitch extends his research on the numerous and varied public monuments and functional memorials: bridges, parks, stadiums.

Finally, virtually all of the trends described above have their counterparts in the field of history, with important studies of the social agency (and sometimes lack thereof) of US soldiers being conducted by Jennifer Keene (*Doughboys, the Great War, and the Remaking of America*, 2001), Richard Slotkin (*Lost Battalions: The Great War and the Crisis of American Nationality*, 2006), and Adriane Lentz-Smith (*Freedom Struggles: African Americans and World War I*, 2009); the routine experience of doughboys is detailed in Richard Faulkner (*Pershing's Crusaders: The American Soldier in World War I*, 2017). Frances H. Early's *A World Without War* (1997) focuses on women's efforts to oppose war; Lettie Gavin's *American Women in World War I* (1997) examines women's work more broadly; and Christopher Capozzola's *Uncle Sam Wants You* (2008) finds women integral as symbols and actors to the formation of the modern "surveillance state" (173). Historical study continues to cross-pollinate with literary criticism, producing literary history such as Mark Whalan's chapter on the "Military-Industrial Complex." In short, historians' perspectives on US society during the First World War continue to demand the attention of future interpreters of that society, its texts, and its artifacts. While American centennial commemorations of the end of the Great War were considerably less prominent than their counterparts in Europe, the study of US participation in that war and its repercussions into the twenty-first century is a robust enterprise, as the essays in this volume attest.

0.2 Why the First World War Was Fought and the United States Joined

All the major participants in the First World War were in some sense aggressors – believing that by military action they could accomplish important national goals. Correlatively, all could feel themselves to be fighting in defense of the nation. Nationalism in the early twentieth century was embedded within the context of capitalist competition on an unprecedented global scale. As Eric Hobsbawm notes, most capitalists in the early twentieth century felt that a general war would be catastrophic for

business (315–316), yet the material and financial imperatives of capitalism nevertheless produced volatility throughout Europe, as the need for raw materials and, to a lesser extent, markets propelled its nations to seek colonies in the non-European world. Simultaneously, the drive toward accumulation of capital led to internal economic inequality and social divisions; external enemies might provide an appealing object for popular antagonism. Hence the capitalist dynamic placed the major European nations effectively on a collision course (Hobsbawm 311).

The giant new corporations of the monopoly and proto-Fordist era were transnational in their economic reach – in natural resources, markets, and finance – yet remained tied to particular nation-states. In leading the Industrial Revolution, Great Britain gained military advantages that generated a massive head start in colonialization as well (Anievas 63). Yet with its predominant status, Great Britain came to depend upon its empire for raw materials, labor, and even food. Hence when Imperial Germany launched a major ship-building program at the turn of the century, Great Britain felt it "a matter of life or death" to respond (Hobsbawm 320). The arms race was on, complete with its own vicious circle: as nations realized how much "military power became, more than ever before, dependent on their level of economic development" (Anievas 68), they sought to spur capitalist expansion; then, as all nations' productive – and destructive – capacity increased, each nation found it needed to ratchet up its economic productivity still further.

Alexander Anievas, author of the closing chapter of this collection, "The World," employs the concept of the "uneven and combined" development of global capitalism to understand the outbreak of war in 1914 (60–61). While the concept applies most obviously to the relationship of colonizing powers to their colonies, Anievas further notes that the internationalization of industrial technology, finance, and managerial acumen – another facet of combined development – allowed industrializing nations that trailed Great Britain to catch up relatively rapidly. In the later nineteenth century, Germany and the United States matched, then surpassed, British productivity. Thereafter the British Empire could not stand alone, leading it into the entangling military alliance of the Triple Entente. Meanwhile, lacking the colonial resources of both France and Great Britain, Germany was led to assume a far more aggressive diplomatic and military posture than its rivals. Still further destabilizing was Germany's calculation that the less industrialized but massive Imperial Russia promised soon to become more powerful, making war in the East more attractive sooner rather than later (Anievas 79).

National development was "uneven" in political and cultural terms as well: each nation had its own version of historical memory and political precedent, which could predispose it toward diplomatic and military recklessness. Recent threats to the integrity of the Austro-Hungarian Empire certainly contributed to its ultimatum to Serbia, which required full Serbian cooperation in suppressing the organization responsible for the archduke's assassination (Hobsbawm 323; Lafore 225–226, 234–235). France's humiliation in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871 resulted in the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine to Germany and inspired both French eagerness to fight and the disastrous strategy of a swift offensive to liberate the lost provinces (Tuchman 31–33).

Nationalism involves not only the central political and juridical organization of modern societies – essential to the massive armies of the Great War (Keegan 14–15) – but also an ideological dimension, the identification of whole populations with the nation, often expressed in familial terms: the Fatherland, Mother Russia, Uncle Sam. This widely shared identification, with few demurrals and limited dissent, best explains why the people of Europe accepted the manifold sacrifices that modern war extracted even as the horrible scope of those sacrifices began to emerge. Besides providing combat-ready armies of millions, universal service offered a rite of passage for the young men of every major continental nation and, hence, a nexus for close national identification. It also offered a tangible alternative to the class-bound realities of peacetime society, as is evident in American journalist Mildred Aldrich's first-hand account of the French mobilization:

> It is not the marching into battle of an army that has chosen soldiering. It is the marching out of all the people – of every temperament – the rich, the poor, the timid and the bold, the sensitive and the hardened, the ignorant and the scholar – all men, because they happen to be males, called on not only to cry, "Vive la France," but to see to it that she does live if dying for her can keep her alive. (*Hilltop* 22)

In an era of secularization, Karen Armstrong argues, the nation-state assumes the roles in daily life traditionally assumed by religion, even extending to defining moral conduct and the place of ultimate value heretofore reserved for God (299–301).

While the European nations could claim self-defense as a motive, the United States could not: no one was going to invade across the Atlantic. Partially because of this, Wilson foregrounded the claim that the United States was above the motives of national aggrandizement in his address to Congress on April 2, 1917, requesting a declaration of war: "We desire no

conquest, no dominion. We seek no indemnities for ourselves, no material compensation for the sacrifices we shall freely make" (United States, President 381). The singularity of the US position may be seen in the fact that until early 1917 the United States had been officially committed to neutrality – Wilson won reelection on the slogan "He kept us out of war," and as late as January 1917 he had offered the US as an impartial broker of armistice negotiations under the guiding principle of "peace without victory" (Tooze 53–54).

However, the US stance toward the war emerged predominantly not from moral superiority but from mundane and material calculations. While the multitude of immigrants from Germany, Ireland, and Southern and Eastern Europe could give the United States credibility as a neutral arbiter, political leaders saw large and influential groups of German Americans and Irish Americans, especially, as needing to be assimilated as quickly as possible. The size of the task may be judged by the freedom with which German Americans, as recounted in Lorie Vanchena's essay, celebrated Germany's initial victories by belting out "Die Wacht am Rhein" in bar-rooms throughout Eastern and Midwestern cities ("'Hochs'"). Meanwhile material interests drew the United States ever closer to the Allies. With the Royal Navy blockading Germany, American industries traded almost exclusively with members of the Triple Entente, and US financiers, led by J. P. Morgan, Jr., likewise extended them loans, soon reaching billions of dollars. As Adam Tooze observes, "The more that Britain borrowed in America and the more it purchased, the harder it would be for Wilson to detach his country from the fate of the Entente" (49).

Ultimately the United States intervened in 1917 for much the same structural and socioeconomic reasons as led the European powers into war in 1914. Europe went to war because each nation's leaders imagined a national benefit in doing so. Thus also the United States. The principal difference was that the United States succeeded where the others failed: by 1918 the United States stood at the apex of the world capitalist system to such an extent that a new US-led hegemonic world-system seemed possible (van der Pijl 73–74; Tooze 9–10). Historian Daniel Smith calls American intervention *The Great Departure*; far from being a "great departure," US intervention was simply its entrance, over a century in preparation, onto the world stage. Beginning with the Monroe Doctrine, the United States had made the Western hemisphere its virtual fiefdom. In the Spanish-American War the United States had wrested colonies from a decrepit European power. But the United States did not need colonies as the European powers did, for, in a clash of different social formations based

on different modes of production, manifested in a centuries-long genocidal campaign against the Native Nations of North America, it had already secured a continent-spanning resource base under a centralized federal authority (Tooze 14–15).

Wilson, in closing his call for a war declaration, pledged the nation to fight for "democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own governments, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free" (United States, President 383). Even as this call was inspirational for many who read these words, the limited nature of Wilson's democracy seems foremost in retrospect. Several essays in this collection – especially "Free Speech" by Ernest Freeberg, "African Americans" by Françoise Hamlin, and "Conscientious Objectors" by Scott Bennett – show clearly that the US war effort did *not* consider democracy as extending to antiwar dissenters, citizens descended from black slaves, or citizens opposed to murder by the state as well as by individuals. As for what Wilson *did* mean by "democracy" and "freedom," his formulation is revealing, for in suggesting a "concert" that would become the League of Nations, Wilson transforms terms customarily applied to individual rights and responsibilities pertaining to self-government into national powers and characteristics. "Free nations" – chiefly the victorious European powers and the United States – would operate via "a universal dominion of right" to guide other nations in a system of enforced security and stability that would ensure the fullest and freest flow of trade and capital throughout the world, from which the United States, as the most powerful national participant, would stand to gain more than any other nation.

0.3 The Great War and the Intellectuals

Considerable intellectual gymnastics were required to justify intervention in a war an ocean away from the United States, a war which had killed millions and remained locked in a mass-murderous stalemate since December of 1914. But then again, President Wilson was (and remains) the only US president to earn a PhD, a historian specializing in US politics, and former president of Princeton University. His principal political adversary, former president Theodore Roosevelt, was himself a bestselling and respected author. If it would be disingenuous to call the decision to intervene a matter of debate, given the structural factors outlined above, answers to the question of *how* the United States would

exert its socioeconomic muscle appeared very much up for grabs in the winter and spring of 1917 – and beyond.

In his earliest writing on the war, Roosevelt did not explicitly advocate for direct American involvement but for the need to be prepared for war. Still, the conclusion of *America and the World War* (1915) makes clear where its author is headed: "The storm that is raging in Europe at this moment is terrible and evil; but it is also grand and noble. Untried men who live at ease will do well to remember that there is a certain sublimity even in Milton's defeated archangel, but none whatever in the spirits who kept neutral, who remained at peace, and dared side neither with hell nor with heaven" (277). Notwithstanding the implication that he saw little difference between the demons and the angels in this war, Roosevelt had by late 1914 concluded that an assertion of national rights and the national sense of right dictated American involvement (D. Kennedy 381). He advocated for this position incessantly: through countless speeches, publications such as *Fear God and Take Your Own Part* (1916), and a national preparedness movement in which he joined forces with Major General Leonard Wood. As Adam Szetela's essay in this collection explores, preparedness was both a legislative lobby and a practical organization that set up camps in Plattsburg, New York, and elsewhere to inculcate an elite nucleus for the great national army to come.

Roosevelt drew the support of the *New Republic* when founded by Herbert Croly, Walter Weyl, and Walter Lippmann in 1914. But by the middle of 1916 the progressive journal was squarely behind Wilson, even though his movement toward declaring war on Germany was slower than desired. Roosevelt was a realist in his view of international relations, based on great powers each with their respective sphere of influence: "Imperialistic Nationalism," as Weyl critically labeled it (2). Wilson saw world politics in a manner closer to what neo-Gramscian theorists would call hegemony (van der Pijl 51–59) – in Weyl's terms, "Internationalism." Of the crucial role the United States could play, Weyl explained: "By our comparative freedom of action we can exert an immense influence either in accentuating the struggle between the industrial nations or in promoting a concert of action based upon a discovered community of interest" (153). The *New Republic* and Wilson shared this understanding of the United States as promoting not just its own interests but more broadly the interests of what Lippmann called "the Atlantic world" ("Defense" 69). This conception would require careful modulation of immediate interests to more strategic, longer-term national interests, actively incorporating the interests of subordinate partner nations and even including, in Lippmann's