Introduction

> Dear Graeme
>
> I have read your manuscript with the greatest of interest. You have recorded your experiences in a way that is perhaps not possible in more formal histories, and, while not departing from the authenticity of events, by your personal reactions you have added an outstanding account of the human factors which are ultimately so important.[1]

In 1963, Second World War veteran Graeme Ogden's memoir of wartime naval service entered a fast-flowing tide of personal narratives published by British military personnel who had fought in that conflict. Throughout the seven decades since the end of the Second World War, increasing numbers of these books appeared in print and became cemented into what Graham Dawson identifies as an enduring popular 'pleasure-culture of war' in Britain.[2] Yet as Rear-Admiral Rupert Sherbrooke's foreword to Ogden's *My Sea Lady* articulates, they also proffer an immense value to the social and cultural historian of warfare. Positioning published veteran memoirs as repositories of vital information about the ways in which former servicemen remembered, understood, and mediated their war, *The Veterans' Tale* establishes the unique contribution of post-war published military memoirs to the aggregate of scholarship of modern war and memory. The veterans' memoirs of the Second World War belong to a lengthy cultural tradition of telling and receiving old soldiers' stories in Britain. Indeed, when prophesying his soldiers' creation of memories of Agincourt, William Shakespeare's 'Henry V' sagely observes, 'Old men forget: yet all shall be forgot,/ But

[1] Rear-Admiral Rupert Sherbrooke, foreword to Graeme Ogden, *My Sea Lady: The Story of H. M. S. Lady Madeleine From February 1941 to February 1943* (London: Hutchinson, 1963), p. 9.

[2] Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 4.

he'll remember with advantages/ What feats he did that day.'[3] The playwright alluded here to the veterans' recollections of fighting, and the emotional meanings that they later came to ascribe to battle. The same process of remembering with 'advantages', of finding order and significance in combat during the reflective leisure of peacetime, also drove the creation of the Second World War veterans' stories.

That wily bird, Shakespeare, was well aware of the fighting man's love of telling a good story. The embellishments, the factual discrepancies, the shifting and conflicting memories which naturally occur within the narratives of the soldier-raconteur and are wryly identified by the playwright as 'advantages' of the veteran's memory, might easily be regarded as maddening *dis*advantages to the historical researcher. *The Veterans' Tale*, however, suggests that these inconsistencies of recall and evident subjectivities of veteran war stories are precisely what make them a fascinating and rich source of evidence about the experience of war as it is lived and remembered throughout a former soldier's lifetime. Old soldiers may forget much about their lives, but as Shakespeare remarks, they also often remember and retell their participation in the great events of war for a long time after that war has ended. Rather like the Battle of Agincourt in *Henry V*, a distinctive and spellbinding national mythology was tightly woven around the Second World War in Britain. Swathed in popular images and discourses of the nation's intense pride in attaining victory over the evils of Nazi fascism, the Second World War represented a conflict in which the British ex-serviceman could legitimately exhibit personal pride in his own participation. Unravelling the individual and collective tales of battle that British veterans narrated and published between 1950 and 2010, this book trains fresh sights upon the experience and meaning of the Second World War to those who won it.

As the Second World War slides out of living memory in Britain, *The Veterans' Tale* examines the lived, remembered, and recorded experience of battle within veteran memoir. Traditionally, scholarly investigation of military memoirs has been enacted within the discipline of literary criticism, a field which includes such notable works as Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975) and Samuel Hynes' *The Soldiers' Tale* (1998).[4] Fussell's research marked the beginning of new scholarly attitudes towards war literature, playing a pivotal role in shaping understandings of the canon of First World War texts as part of a broader

[3] William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, in *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, (ed.) W. J. Craig (London: Magpie Books, 1993), p. 491.

[4] Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975); Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (London: Pimlico, 1998). A more recent addition to this list is Alex Vernon (ed.), *Arms and the Self: War, the Military and Autobiographical Writing* (Kent (Ohio): Kent State University Press, 2005).

myth-making process within twentieth-century British society. His analysis of the interplay between war, personal narrative, and memory uncovered the ways in which British experience on the Western Front between 1914 and 1918 was 'remembered, conventionalized and mythologized' in literary form.[5] This approach proved 'revolutionary' to furthering scholarly understandings of war, since it demonstrated that battlefield literature offered a vehicle for the expression of collective experience.[6] *The Veterans' Tale* absorbs these ideas to examine how the veteran-memoirists of the Second World War also engaged in a proprietorial form of myth-making in order to shape scholarly, cultural, and official remembrance of 'their' war. In mapping the literary scholarship of military memoirs, Hynes' work provided a subsequent landmark text within the field, making a staunch effort to survey British and American servicemen's memoirs from the First and Second World Wars, and the Vietnam conflict of the 1960s and 1970s. Expanding upon the limited number of sources interrogated by Fussell, Hynes insisted upon the importance of privileging the narratives of the 'one-book men', authors who told their story and then dropped quietly back into anonymity again.[7] Despite this laudable objective, a serious drawback of Hynes' study is its over-reliance upon the more 'literary' and self-conscious popular texts from the Second World War, which does little to rescue the critical mass of military memoirs still consigned to relative oblivion. Building on Hynes' foundations, *The Veterans' Tale* thus extends its scope of enquiry to include a much wider range of these books. Nevertheless, Hynes' consideration of some of the formal qualities of military memoir underpins the identification of narratives examined in this book, which also acknowledges Hynes' salutary reminder that war memoirists are invariably a self-selecting group. Correspondingly, it is contended here that attention must be paid to the reasons why these authors, whether they were prolific writers or 'one-book men', made a decision to pen and make public a narrative of their combat experiences.

To these path-finding literary scholars, especially Hynes, a considerable debt is acknowledged in my own study. However, whilst some of their techniques of literary criticism structurally underpin my own analysis of war memoirs, *The Veterans' Tale* situates itself firmly in the cultural-military history camp. Addressing themes of war, memory, and emotions in relation to veteran-memoirists, this study is intended to fill a critical and inexplicable gap in the rapidly expanding field of historical enquiry into military life-writing. In recent years, military memoirs have come to exert an evident appeal for a growing number of researchers across

[5] Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. ix.
[6] Susanna Rustin, 'Hello to all that', *The Guardian*, 31 July 2004.
[7] Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale*, p. xv.

the fields of history and social geography. Under the 'war and society' umbrella, military memoirs have become increasingly promoted as an essential means of recovering the experience of battle and understanding the complex relationship between war, the soldier, and society. In 2008, Brian Bond's *Survivors of a Kind* combined the perspectives of cultural and military historians in his approach to British First World War memoirs spawned by the Western Front.[8] Crucially, Bond established that the long-term effects of the conflict upon combatants could be assessed through their personal narratives. This view exerts a formative influence over *The Veterans' Tale*, which examines the ways in which post-1950 military memoirs of the Second World War recorded the enduring impact of battle upon veterans. As a result of a recent cultural turn towards military life-writing, the chronological margins of studying war memoirs have been considerably expanded outwards. Neil Ramsey and Catriona Kennedy have traced soldiers' narratives of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, whilst Yuval Noah Harari proffers a comprehensive examination of Renaissance military memoirs. Directing scholarly attention towards the more recent twentieth century, the works of K. Neil Jenkings, and Rachel Woodward address contemporary soldiers' life-writing from wars in the Falklands, the Gulf, Northern Ireland, Afghanistan, and Iraq.[9] In this book, a slightly different emphasis is placed on the identity of the military memoirist as an ex-serviceman, or an old soldier, whose authorship is reflective and constructive rather than one of straightforward reportage. This allows for the long-term physical, psychological, and emotional impact of war upon an ex-combatant to be significantly opened up. The central pillar of this book is a scrutiny of the unique identity of the post-war military memoir which 'records the remembered war that persists in the mind through a lifetime.'[10] This

[8] Brian Bond, *Survivors of a Kind: Memoirs of the Western Front* (London: Continuum, 2008).

[9] Neil Ramsey, *The Military Memoir and Romantic Literary Culture, 1780–1835* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011); Catriona Kennedy, *Narratives of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars: Military and Civilian Experience in Britain and Ireland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Yuval Noah Harari, *Renaissance Military Memoirs: War, History, and Identity, 1450–1600* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2004); Harari, 'Armchairs, Coffee, and Authority: Eye-Witnesses and Flesh-Witnesses Speak about War, 1100–2000', *Journal of Military History*, 74:1 (January 2010), 53–78; Vernon, *Arms and the Self*; Rachel Woodward and K. Neil Jenkings, 'Soldiers' bodies and the contemporary British military memoir', in *War and the Body: Militarisation, Practice and Experience* (ed.) Kevin McSorley (London: Routledge, 2013), 152–64; K. Neil Jenkings and Rachel Woodward, 'Communicating War through the Contemporary British Military Memoir: The Censorships of Genre, State, and Self', *Journal of War & Culture Studies* 7:1 (2014), 5–17.

[10] Samuel Hynes, 'Personal Narratives and Commemoration', in *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*, (eds.) Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 211.

book thus represents the first extended scholarly treatment of *veteran* memoirs, situating these texts as particularly valuable to historians of warfare because of their capacity to shed light upon the ex-combatant's retrospective remembrance and understanding of battle.

Surprisingly, the voices of British Second World War veteran-memoirists have yet to be heard on a collective scale within the field of scholarship of war, memory, and personal narratives. Towards the end of the market that caters for more popular histories of wartime martial experience, historians have relied heavily on mining these accounts of soldiers, sailors, and aircrew for the vivid details and human emotions that lend colour to battle for wider reading audiences.[11] Among the extensive terrain of Second World War historiography, the post-war memoirs of former servicemen have been dotted here and there, but their use has been mostly restricted to the provision of salient anecdotes or fleeting descriptions of battle conditions. Given both the fruitful and expanding nature of scholarly enquiry into military life-writing and the Second World War's continued resonance within British national culture, the gaping hole in academic scholarship of the myriad war memoirs generated by the 1939–45 conflict is remarkable. To date, despite a burgeoning literature examining the memoirs of British military captivity in the Far East during the war, no single purpose-built work exclusively addresses British military memoirs of the Second World War.[12] Where they have been cursorily utilised, these books are often somewhat crudely sandwiched into wider discussions that focus upon the narratives of First World War and Vietnam soldiers as a twentieth century literature of disillusionment. Within recent years, Yuval Noah Harari has deservedly become an authority on the genre of Renaissance military memoirs, but the clarity and insight that he brings to his approach to these documents is not entirely matched by his use of twentieth century military life-writing in order to exhibit the distinctive design in structure

[11] See, for example, Patrick Bishop, *Fighter Boys: Saving Britain 1940* (London: HarperCollins, 2003); Brian Lavery, *In Which They Served: The Royal Navy Officer Experience in the Second World War* (London: Conway, 2008); Glyn Prysor, *Citizen Sailors: The Royal Navy in the Second World War* (London: Viking, 2011); Michael G. Walling, *Forgotten Sacrifice: The Arctic Convoys of World War II* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2016); Kevin Wilson, *Men of Air: The Doomed Youth of Bomber Command, 1944* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007).

[12] See, for example, Frances Houghton, '"To the Kwai and Back": Myth, Memory and Memoirs of the "Death Railway" 1942–1943', *Journal of War and Culture Studies*, 7:3 (2014), 223–35; Lizzie Oliver, *Prisoners of the Sumatra Railway: Narratives of History and Memory* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018); Sibylla Jane Flower, 'Captors and Captives on the Burma-Thailand Railway', in Bob Moore and Kent Fedorowich (eds.), *Prisoners of War and their Captors in World War II* (Oxford: Berg, 1996), pp. 227–52; Roger Bourke, *Prisoners of the Japanese: Literary Imagination and the Prisoner-of-War Experience* (Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 2006).

and content of the earlier accounts. Although this method allows a number of valuable conclusions about Renaissance testimonies to be drawn, it also results in a collection of rather frustrating generalisations about the later personal narratives of combat. Harari's broad claim that scholars studying twentieth-century war memoirs 'have reached the almost unanimous conclusion that … soldiers have become disillusioned with war, and their own image has partly changed from that of heroes to that of victims' is not particularly helpful to any investigation of Second World War memoirs.[13] The veterans' tale of frontline service between 1939 and 1945 shows no sign at all of the disenchantment or betrayal of ideals which may be typically read into the canon of First World War and Vietnam soldiers' testimonies. In fact, the Second World War veteran-memoirists were inordinately proud of their wartime service and clearly subscribed to a concept of the 1939–45 conflict as a 'Good War'.[14] Any public or private suggestion that these men ought to feel guilty or victimised by their wartime experiences typically received extremely short shrift from them.

The theoretical orientation of this book is rooted in a number of fields, weaving together key tenets from memory studies, auto/biographical studies, and the emergent field of history of the emotions to suggest an innovative approach to discussing military memoirs. Within the extant scholarship, valuable new ways of understanding the wider relationship between war and society were offered by a 'boom' in studies of memory which occurred during the 1980s.[15] Academics from multi-disciplines shifted interpretations of private and 'collective' memory from passive to active, relocating the changeability, flexibility, and permeability of memory as a source of interest and advantage to the scholar. Fundamentally, war memoirists came to be viewed within this context as 'makers' who create narratives of remembrance in which meaning is emergent rather than fixed, and Jay Winter and Samuel Hynes have emphasised a need to open up investigation of the place of soldiers' tales in relation to broader historical remembrance.[16] *The Veterans' Tale* responds to this need by enquiring more deeply into the relationship between military memoirs and wider official, scholarly, and cultural remembrance of the Second World War. To a great extent, this study of veteran memoirs is thus informed by the ideas of leading scholars within the field of memory

[13] Yuval Noah Harari, 'Martial Illusions: War and Disillusionment in Twentieth-Century and Renaissance Military Memoirs', *Journal of Military History*, 69:1 (2005), 43.
[14] Studs Terkel, *'The Good War': An Oral History of World War Two* (New York: Pantheon, 1984).
[15] Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 1.
[16] Ibid., p. 9; Hynes, 'Personal Narratives and Commemoration', pp. 205–6.

studies. In particular, it draws upon the theories of Maurice Halbwachs, who demonstrates that memories do not simply exist within a vacuum, but are instead composed within 'social frameworks' that exert an influence upon the recall, recognition, and localization of memory.[17] Standing at the intersection of private and public memory, the published veteran memoir is thus ideally placed to illumine the shifting and often conflicting affinity between individual and 'collective' remembrance of the Second World War in Britain. In analysing the production and reproduction of veteran memory in published literary form, this study also relies heavily upon the work of Henri Rousso, who identifies any source that proposes a deliberate reconstruction of an event for a social purpose as 'carriers' or 'vectors' of memory.[18] Weaving these ideas into its approach towards published veteran memoirs, *The Veterans' Tale* locates these narratives as precious sites from which the veterans could dictate and contest representations of the Second World War.

Oral histories have also come to occupy an important place in examining narratives of war and memory during the twentieth century. In many ways, an oral history bears a marked similarity to a written memoir in that both reconstruct experience from memory and attempt to access an often long-past voice from the situation of the present. Consequently, *The Veterans' Tale* engages with key ideas produced from within the domain of oral histories of war. Alistair Thomson's ground-breaking *Anzac Memories* (1994) explores the processes through which Australian veterans of the First World War composed their memories of war across a lifetime, and how their own later-life experiences and understandings influenced their recollections.[19] Thomson's examination of the ways in which meanings about the past evolved for the old soldiers whom he interviewed thus highlights the necessity to bear in mind that lived and remembered experiences of battle are shared points on the continuum of a lifetime. *The Veterans' Tale* also considers the work of Penny Summerfield in terms of the composure and articulation of wartime self and experience. Summerfield's study of women's oral histories of the Second World War reminds that personal testimony is always inter-subjective, drawing from generalised discourse to construct the particular personal subject.[20]

[17] Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 38.
[18] Henri Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 219.
[19] Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living With the Legend* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994)
[20] Penny Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives: Discourse and Subjectivity in Oral Histories of the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 15.

Bearing this in mind, *The Veterans' Tale* maintains a particular focus upon the wider discourse, language, and imagery that was available to the veteran-memoirist to reconstruct both his experiences of battle and his sense of wartime self.

This book also examines the question of what the veteran-memoirist consciously and subconsciously remembered of his wartime experiences, and which memories found their way into his personal narrative. In doing so, it draws upon a number of studies rooted in the neurosciences. In their comprehensive study of war and remembrance in the twentieth century, Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan pulled together major lines of scientific understandings of memory, finding that most experiences leave long-term memory traces, although these may differ in density. The weight of a memory determines how well it may be recollected, and density is moulded by the degree of drama or uniqueness of an experience. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these scholars found that memories of combat were particularly dense, and therefore long-lasting, because the experience was intensely personal and dramatic. Harrowing moments conferred further density upon a memory.[21] In his study of over 1,000 Second World War British veterans, psychologist Nigel Hunt also found that many of the strongest memories held by these men pertained to battle. The sheer horror of their experiences on the battlefield remained active and tenacious in their recollections.[22] Among the field of neurosciences, links between emotion and memory are now well-established. Ulrike Rimmele *et al*. find that 'emotion enhances the subjective sense of remembering', granting an increased subjective intensity of memory and higher confidence in the accuracy of remembering.[23] Broadly speaking, therefore, the reconstructive nature of individual memory means that experience is transformed into recollection by uniqueness, importance, imaginative elaboration, and confabulation.[24] Not all of the serviceman's time was spent in close proximity to violence and danger; indeed a common aphorism holds that war is 90 per cent boredom and 10 per cent action. It is that 10 per cent of violent, exciting, terrifying experience which is remembered and recorded in the Second World War veterans' tale – as one memoirist of Bomber Command mused, 'who the hell can

[21] Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan, 'Setting the Framework', in *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*, p. 12.
[22] Nigel C. Hunt, *Memory, War and Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 140–3.
[23] Ulrike Rimmele, Lila Davachi, Radoslav Petrov, Sonya Dougal, Elizabeth A. Phelps, 'Emotion enhances the subjective feeling of remembering, despite lower accuracy for contextual details', *Emotion*, 11:3 (2011), 553.
[24] Hunt, *Memory, War and Trauma*, p. 118.

write a book about boredom?'[25] *The Veterans' Tale* thus takes as its focus that 10 per cent of remembered and recorded experience 'at the sharp end' of war.

Beneath the surface of personal recollection lurks the sharp rock of war-related trauma, upon which a veteran's memory may easily founder. Dominick LaCapra identifies trauma as 'a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence.'[26] Furthermore, as Hunt and Robbins note, trauma – such as may be sustained on the battlefield – disrupts the processing of memory, existing as an unconscious, dissociated recollection which later may be prompted into consciousness through stimulation of reminders.[27] As such, it is necessary to keep in mind Paul Ricoeur's caution of the necessity of acknowledging that individual memory may prove an inherently unstable source.[28] Sometimes it is difficult to identify whether a veteran-memoirist's memory has been corrupted or simply erased by traumatic experience. Equally, it is possible to over-identify trauma in these narratives and attribute every silence or inaccuracy to psychological damage. Nevertheless, *The Veterans' Tale* argues that it is possible to navigate these challenges, frequently with the help of the veteran-memoirist himself. A number of the authors in this study endured psychological breakdown, or some form of what is now termed 'post-traumatic stress disorder', and their accounts proffer important evidence about the impact of wartime trauma and 'battle fatigue' upon the author's own sense of self. Rather than lamenting the ways in which trauma erases memory, therefore, it is more productive to consider how the act of creating a memoir helped traumatised veterans to articulate recoverable memories as an act of catharsis.

As Thomson pointed out in a recent new edition of *Anzac Memories*, the field of 'memory studies' has become closely enmeshed with an 'autobiographical age' among historiography of war and society.[29]As works of life-writing, war memoirs have a distinctive family connection to the literature of auto/biographical studies. Theories connected to the field of auto/biographical study prove enormously helpful in approaching the veterans' tale, particularly in terms of helping to move past a thorny 'truth' versus 'fiction' problem which lingers around these narratives.

[25] John Wainwright, *Tail-End Charlie* (London: Macmillan, 1978), p. 26.
[26] Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 41.
[27] Nigel C. Hunt and Ian Robbins, 'Telling Stories of the War: Ageing Veterans Coping with Their Memories through Narrative', *Oral History*, 26:2 (1998), p. 59.
[28] Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 80.
[29] Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend*, rev. ed., (Monash: Monash University Publishing, 2013), p. 1.

Fussell suggests that the war memoir is not in fact a personal history but is rather 'a kind of fiction', in which the imposition of literary devices of lexis, syntax, structure, and plot when turning memory into linear prose narrative undermine the 'truth' of lived experience.[30] Auto/biographical theory suggests differently, positing that attempting to recover an individual's past solely by matching up a person's recollection with established 'fact' severely limits the usefulness of these texts. As Mark Freeman notes, 'if we think of "truth" in this context only in terms of its faithful correspondence to what was, then autobiographical texts must indeed be deemed illusory and fictional.' Crucially, therefore, he argues that there is little reason to think of truth in such a 'limited and simplistic' way.[31] Similarly, Laura Marcus muses that very few critics of auto/biographical writing would demand that auto/biographical truth should be viewed solely in terms of literal verifiability. She suggests that the seemingly intractable problem of 'referentiality' – the kind and degree of 'truth' that can be expected from autobiographical writing – may be resolved by discussion of the author's intentions and motivations. If the autobiography is 'sincere' in an attempt to understand self and experience, and to make these clear to others, then the 'auto/biographical intention' must be received seriously.[32] A key line of enquiry in *The Veterans' Tale* is thus to interrogate the intention and function of war memoir, deconstructing the veterans' motives for recovering and communicating experience, and the processes by which they attempted to retain the integrity of their narratives in order to bear witness as 'truthfully', in accordance with their own views, as possible.

Furthermore, within the field of auto/biographical study, it has long been recognised that life-writing is a process of 'collusion' between past and present.[33] The creation of an autobiographical text stems from, as James Olney has argued, 'the vital impulse to order that has always caused man to create.'[34] *The Veterans' Tale* thus posits that penning a war memoir allowed the veteran to shape and order his recollections of the past, imposing pattern and coherency upon experience. The narrativisation and emplotment of memory on paper granted a precious second reading of experience, offering the former serviceman a valuable space for reflection

[30] Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, p. 310.
[31] Mark Freeman, *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 32.
[32] Laura Marcus, *Auto/Biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 3.
[33] Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1960), p. 11.
[34] James Olney, *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 3.