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The Veteran's Tale: British Military Memoirs

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In *The Veterans' Tale: British Military Memoirs of the Second World War,* Frances Houghton addresses a scholarly vacuum at the intersection of military life-writing, memory studies, auto/biographical studies, and history. Houghton, a Lecturer in Modern British History at the University of Manchester, observes that military memoirs have recently been recognized by the scholarly community as sites of recovery for the "experience of battle and [for] understanding the complex relationship between war, the soldier, and society" (p. 4). Despite this interest, however, Houghton contends that prominent works analyzing memoirs have chiefly originated from critical literary perspectives (Fussell, 2000; Hynes, 1998). Yet to Houghton, there is a need for a text that analyzes artifacts outside of the "'literary' and self-conscious popular texts from the Second World War" (p. 3). Relying on over 100 veteran memoirs and narratives, Houghton convincingly responds to this exigence by articulating how veterans used authorship to both enhance and challenge the Second World War's "wider cultural iconography of battle" through their "interrelated psychological relationships with landscape[s], weaponry, the enemy, and comrades" (p. 12).

Houghton's detailed introduction serves multiple purposes: First, she highlights the agency of memoirists, arguing that writing empowered them to "claim possession" of their stories and to speak for the "combatants who were never given the chance to tell their stories" (p. 14). To this end, Houghton's argument hinges on observations of veterans' use of language and imagery in their memoirs, particularly in the ways that veterans leveraged them to truthfully "shape and order…recollections of the past" (p. 10); how they allowed veterans to "reassemble shattered notions of masculine self into a coherent and meaningful image" (p. 11); and how they captured veterans' "own stated reasons for writing and releasing a war memoir" (p. 21). Secondly, Houghton details how she selected her memoir corpora by focusing on memoirs written by "fighting men of junior or other rank serving with the Royal Air Force's Fighter and Bomber commands, armored and infantry units within the British Army, and the submarines and 'small ships'…of the Royal Navy" (p. 23). In effect, Houghton omits narratives authored by "extraordinary personnel" (p. 22), as well as women due to their preclusion from "frontline combatant roles" (p. 23). Lastly, Houghton clarifies that she does not include any memoirs that were written *during* the war and cites temporal distance as a necessary component for veterans to digest and reflect upon their experiences. Houghton then concludes her introduction by briefly describing the structure of her book.

In this regard, chapters one and two examine veterans' motives and their experiences composing and publishing memoirs. In chapter one, Houghton asserts that veterans were motivated to write memoirs to communicate with three audiences: the self, civilian readers, and combatant comrades. As a form of "self-communion," memoirs allowed veterans to ventilate residual feelings relating to their service (p. 28). These included longing to return to the "sanctuary" (p. 33) of military environments, confronting the "sting of [the] traumatic loss" (p. 37) of comrades, and the desire to assert control over events in the war. Externally, Houghton suggests that veterans wrote memoirs to engage with their children, to inform generations that have never experienced battle, and to mentor generations heading into battle. Lastly, veterans composed memoirs to "make a lasting 'imprint' of the wartime identity and the sacrifice of others" (p. 52)—their comrades.

In chapter two, Houghton details how veterans faced several challenges throughout the publishing process. Among these included proving the authenticity of their accounts which consequently inspired some memoirists to incorporate public records as references or to invite well-

known military historians to endorse their final texts. Another hurdle veterans overcame originated from publishing companies' quest for marketability. Publishers sometimes requested that authors temper characterizations of former acquaintances as to avoid legal or social offenses. In spite of these obstacles, however, Houghton maintains that, by and large, memoirists were able to recreate and publish truthful accounts of their experiences.

The next four chapters analyze veterans' "literary representations" (p. 26) of the aforementioned lenses of landscape, weaponry, enemies, and comrades. Chapter three sees Houghton examining how veterans remembered, interpreted, and represented the landscapes of their battles. Houghton consequently details how hostile environments, such as the North African desert or the northern oceans, seemingly forced British Army and Navy servicemen to fight the war "on two fronts" (p. 80). Likewise, another threat to veterans' safety, particularly those within the Bomber Command, was the presence of light during nocturnal operations. According to Houghton, several pilots equated lightlessness with safety because it allowed them to "slink through the night undetected" (p. 84). Houghton eventually closes this chapter by arguing that the ways that memoirists reconstructed their former battlegrounds helped them "detach [themselves] from the human emotions of fear, pain, and loss which accompanied [their] combat experience[s]" (p. 102).

Such feelings were sometimes brought on by veterans' close contacts with war machinery and weaponry—the focus of Houghton's fourth chapter. Houghton asserts that memoirists portrayed machines as "protagonists" (p. 104), frequently endowing them with anthropomorphic qualities in their memoirs. For example, numerous sailors described their vessels as female companions at sea. Conversely, pilots possessed less genteel attitudes toward their aircraft despite also characterizing them with feminine language. Moreover, at the opposite end of the spectrum, pilots also occasionally referred to their planes with either "equine or canine terms" (p. 115) to reflect their desire to control such machinery. Lastly, soldiers' descriptions of their relationships with machinery—their tanks—were less animated compared to that of their Royal Navy and Royal Air Force counterparts. Generally, tanks were not represented fondly within soldier memoirs because of the machines' attrition rate during the Normandy campaign between June and September 1944. In addition, tanks were often hindered by environmental obstructions, therefore imbuing the land effort with a sense of "pragmatic fatalism" (p. 135) that was evident in many soldier memoirs.

In chapter five, Houghton studies how veterans "took responsibility…for crafting personal psychological mechanisms that enabled [them] to kill" (p. 138). For some Royal Navy sailors, this involved using the landscape—the sea—to mask the killing of men. Still other sailors maintained their ability to summon a detached attitude under the conviction that they were not sinking "'innocent' ships" (p. 141). Meanwhile, numerous pilots justified killing by "fantisi[zing] that machines, rather than men, were…[being] clinically dispatched" (p. 150). Lastly, Royal Army memoirists included fewer detailed accounts of actual bloodshed and instead opted for increased personalizations of "the body of the enemy in its specific forms of corpse and prisoner of war, as well as still active combatant" (p. 158). Despite these narrative differences, Houghton maintains that all memoirists struggled to maintain killer mentalities and ultimately humanized their enemies. With this being the case, veterans earnestly hoped that their memoirs would serve as public notices that they were still "'decent' men" and were able to return to a "civic culture that deplored violence" (p. 167).

In chapter six, Houghton addresses the last of her four lenses—comradeship. She asserts that memoirists "foregrounded personal relationships within their units as the ultimate spur in battle" (p. 170). For soldiers, discipline and performance were key proponents of morale as several memoirists recalled the theme of "'doing one's bit'" to maintain the strength and coherence of their unit (p. 177). The sailors' tale focused more so on the manner in which the officers of the "'upper deck'" created a "harmonious…company that could bolster the individual and collective morale of the crew" (p. 180).

Lastly, pilots relayed the importance of selecting their own crew members as a means of ensuring unity and trust during operations. Houghton closes this chapter by briefly acknowledging that relationships between men were critical to morale; however, they could also "occasionally undermine broader military objectives" (p. 203) if mismanaged.

Having provided an overview on the ways that veterans captured their recollections of military service, Houghton uses chapters seven and eight to probe how veterans used these texts to reflect upon their past selves and to, again, claim agency over their stories. Chapter seven is therefore dedicated to how veterans described wartime "coming of age" experiences (p. 205). For the most part, memoirists admit being attracted to military service due to the promises of heroism, hyper-masculinity, and adventure which were romanticized by the media. However, such youthful naiveite was tested, and sometimes deconstructed, once volunteers entered the fearful and grim realities of operational service. All in all, Houghton highlights that the war deeply affected veterans' "constructions of self and masculinity," causing them to mature expediently under circumstances they would have never otherwise imagined (p. 242). Hence, in retrospect, most memoirists displayed a "restrained version of military masculinity" in their narratives, "emphasizing manly martial behavior as bravery without bravado…and compassion without cowardice" (p. 244).

In her eighth chapter, Houghton explores three memoir case studies—*The Recollections of Rifleman Bowlby* by Alex Bowlby (1969), *The Eighth Passenger* by Miles Tripp (1969), and *Convoy is to Scatter* by Jack Broome (1972)—to convey how veterans demonstrated a "shared desire to exert a degree of control over contemporary and future public understandings of conflict" (p. 245). Overarchingly, these memoirs exhibited the difficulties that authors faced when they attempted to speak the truth about their experiences. For instance, Bowlby's description of his former battalion's leadership invited rank-infused libel court action as well as pushback from his publisher. Conversely, Tripp's memoir attempted to "redraw unsatisfactory public memories" of the bombing campaign which left many former aircrew branded as "war criminals" (p. 254). Similarly, Broome's memoir challenged historical accounts of the ill-fated PQ17 convoy which Broome was charged with leading. Following her discussion of the three case studies, Houghton emphasizes the agentic purposes of memoirs as artifacts that allowed veterans to have the "final word on the subject of combatant experience during the Second World War" (p. 271).

Culminating her study, Houghton's short conclusion reiterates the following themes: that memoirs allowed veterans to make meaning of their wartime experiences; that writing and publishing memoirs enabled veterans to augment and challenge public remembrances of the war; and lastly, memoirs often told stories for combatants who no longer could. With these ideas elucidated, Houghton speaks to the audience—who is unnamed, but likely the scholarly community currently engaged with military memoirs. Houghton reminds these readers that memoirs are cultural artifacts that reflect how men persevered through war and what war did to them in return. Therefore, despite efforts by veteran charities in raising awareness of veterans' testimonies and plights, Houghton urges her audience to consider veteran memoirs in a new light—one that recognizes the numerous "psychological and emotional ways in which memories of warfare will make themselves felt across…lifetimes" (p. 279).

Ultimately, Houghton's treatment of veteran memoirs is extraordinary in scope. With every claim she makes, Houghton offers several citations from memoirs in substantiation, thoroughly convincing readers of the authenticity and earnestness of the research that she completed to pay tribute to these Second World War veterans. Therefore, for scholars interested in picking up where Houghton left off, her bibliography is a remarkable resource from which to begin. In addition to nearly 100 primary source memoirs, Houghton includes over 160 secondary, newspaper, and archival sources. Houghton's evidentiary support is thus one of, if not the strongest aspect of her book.

Additionally, in regards to her primary purpose in *The Veterans' Tale*—to draw attention to the ways that veteran-memoirists reconstructed wartime experiences and reflected on former selves—Houghton is unequivocally successful. Houghton's text endows the scholarly community with a thorough report of veterans' military recollections as well as how they dutifully fought to augment and sometimes challenge greater, cultural perceptions of the war effort. *The Veterans' Tale* has therefore clearly begun to fill the void at the intersection of life-writing and World War II British cultural-history, while prompting readers to take it upon themselves to learn from and proliferate veterans' personal recollections of experience.

Of course, with the strengths of Houghton's scholarship inevitably comes minor critiques and limitations. As for the critiques, readers might question the way Houghton scaffolds her argument within individual chapters. For example, in her introduction, Houghton provides her overarching argument, but it is somewhat spread out over multiple pages rather than articulated within a single thesis statement or paragraph, making it potentially difficult to trace upon first read. Moreover, readers will quickly notice that Houghton's organization of chapters three through seven—those that address the four lenses of her argument—is not necessarily uniform. Within each chapter, she dedicates individual sections to either the British Army, Royal Navy, or Royal Air Force—separating memoirists' experiences. These sections vary in order with each chapter, again, possibly complicating readers' efforts to follow key tenants of Houghton's argument.

With regards to the limitations of *The Veterans' Tale*, Houghton is very clear in delineating which memoirs "made the cut" for her study. She excludes texts written by personnel serving in support functions, to include those by women, as well as any memoirs written by members with extraordinary careers—all aspects that she openly acknowledges in her introduction. However, Houghton's decision to omit memoirs written during the war, while understandable, may invite questions from the audience. While including these memoirs might have altered the scope of her project, some readers may wonder how, conversely, they could have perhaps made Houghton's claims more salient—particularly from the memoirists' personal transformation aspect—if they were analyzed in juxtaposition. Overall, despite these rather minor critiques of and limitations of Houghton's work, *The Veterans' Tale* is a valuable, informative, and poignant must-read for anyone interested in military life-writing or experiential British World War II scholarship.

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