

A Month in the Country¹

Reviewed by *Captain Joshua W. Johnson**

*The marvelous thing was coming into this haven of calm water and, for a season, not having to worry my head . . . And, afterwards, perhaps I could make a new start, forget what the War and the rows with Vinny had done to me . . . This is what I need, I thought—a new start and, afterwards, maybe I won't be a casualty anymore.*²

I. Introduction

The list of artistic and cultural exports from Britain to America is long and varied, including Shakespeare, Sherlock Holmes, the Beatles, and *The Office*. Recently, *Downton Abbey*, a British period drama set during World War I, crossed the pond and became a television hit in the United States.³ J.L. Carr's timeless novel, *A Month in the Country*, is yet another British commodity worthy of attention by Americans and specifically by this nation's military leaders, servicemembers, and families in a country that has endured twelve years of combat operations overseas.

A Month in the Country is a short work of fiction that tells the tale of Tom Birkin, a British veteran of World War I, who reflects on the healing power of his summer spent in the English countryside in 1920.⁴ Tom Birkin is suffering from wounds—both seen and unseen—inflicted during his time in combat, and he endures additional pain when his unfaithful wife, Vinny, abandons him.⁵ He accepts a job uncovering a church's wall painting buried by years of neglect in the northern village of Oxgodby, and he discovers a sense of healing and hope, tinged with regret, during his time in the country.⁶

This review highlights the key themes of J.L. Carr's novel, the praiseworthy elements, the flawed elements, and the applicable elements to today's military. Ultimately, the redeeming whole of the book overwhelms its flawed parts. The book is a must-read in today's military environment of

openly confronting and discussing the psychological wounds of war without fear of stigma.⁷ It is an ideal vehicle for generating discussion on resiliency and the struggles of servicemembers and their families. *A Month in the Country* is recommended reading for leaders despite its quirks, especially at a time when the Army encourages "bold, adaptive, and broadened leaders."⁸

II. Healing Through Art, Love, and Fellowship

J.L. Carr's intent was to write "an easy-going story, a rural idyll" with a narrator looking back "regretfully across forty or fifty years."⁹ The author addresses this original intent and more through an emphasis on three key themes tied to the healing of Tom Birkin: art, love, and fellowship. These themes inform the following critical analysis of the book.

First, art plays a predominant role in the book.¹⁰ Tom Birkin is drawn to Oxgodby through his employment in uncovering the medieval wall painting, and he takes great pride in his artistic labor.¹¹ His love and expertise in art is documented throughout the story, and he even imagines the deceased artist speaking to him using the medium of the mural.¹² The actual painting—*A Judgment*—has great symbolism in the story with its depiction of the saved and the damned, infused with its religious message of redemption.¹³ These themes are juxtaposed with Tom

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¹ J.L. CARR, *A MONTH IN THE COUNTRY* (1980) (This book was placed on the Graduate Course reading list by Colonel (Retired) Dave Diner).

² CARR, *supra* note 1, at 20.

³ Jeremy Egner, *A Bit of Britain Where the Sun Still Never Sets*, N.Y. TIMES, Jan. 6, 2013, at AR2, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/06/arts/television/downton-abbey-reaches-around-the-world.html?_r=0 (describing the tremendous success of *Downton Abbey* in the United States and around the world).

⁴ CARR, *supra* note 1, at 20. The book is "short" in that it is approximately 135 pages.

⁵ *Id.* at 12.

⁶ *Id.* at 20.

⁷ All Army Activities Message, 211/2013, 301715Z Aug 13, U.S. Dep't of Army, subject: Ready and Resilient—Army Suicide Prevention Month (Sept. 2013) [hereinafter ALARACT Message 211/2013] (noting that leaders will continuously execute activities and events that build resiliency and promote education of mental health and suicide risks while reducing stigma).

⁸ U.S. DEP'T OF ARMY, DOCTRINE PUB. 6-22, ARMY LEADERSHIP Foreword (1 Aug. 2012) (C1, 10 Sept. 2012) [hereinafter ADP 6-22] (describing the Chief of Staff of the Army's leader expectations).

⁹ CARR, *supra* note 1, at xxi.

¹⁰ J.L. Carr was an artist and had taken up landscape painting and sculpting before writing *A Month in the Country*. *Id.* at xv.

¹¹ *Id.* at 8.

¹² *Id.* at 35 (The artist says to Tom, "If any part of me survives from time's corruption, let it be this. For this was the sort of man I was.")

¹³ *Id.* at 75.

Birkin's own redemption and metaphorical resurrection from his war wounds.

Second, love is central to the story of Tom Birkin. J.L. Carr wanted Tom to look back regretfully over many years but, "recalling a time irrevocably lost, still feel a tug at the heart."¹⁴ Love inflicted a wound on Tom when Vinny abandoned him for another man, but Tom's time in Oxboddy also led him to laugh about Vinny leaving him.¹⁵ Missed opportunities at love are key to Tom's regret of Alice Keach—the wife of Reverend J.G. Keach. Tom never seized the moment when he was aware of his love for Alice: "I should have lifted an arm and taken her shoulder And I did nothing and said nothing."¹⁶ He describes losing Alice as the worst moment of his life.¹⁷ Yet, despite the pain of losing Alice, there is the hint that a second chance at love infused Tom with hope that may not have been present before Oxboddy. J.L. Carr never makes clear if Tom Birkin would agree with Tennyson that it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.¹⁸

Third, and finally, the theme of fellowship was pivotal to Tom's healing. This included the friendship with Kathy Ellerbeck.¹⁹ But the most important fellowship was born between Birkin and his fellow veteran of the war—Charles Moon. They immediately recognized one another as brothers-in-arms; Moon described them as "survivors" and "two of a kind."²⁰ Tom Birkin even shared with Moon his troubles with Vinny.²¹ They shared their post-war struggles and understood each other—they were "men apart."²²

The themes of art, love, and fellowship are central to Tom Birkin's healing process and serve as fertile ground for the analysis that follows.

III. Elements of a Masterpiece

J.L. Carr may have anticipated book reviews and critiques when he penned the following for Tom Birkin: "Well, we all see things with different eyes, and it gets you nowhere hoping that even one in a thousand will see things your way."²³ Fortunately for J.L. Carr, *A Month in the Country* has received plenty of critical acclaim since its first publication in 1980, and is not surprisingly described as "a masterpiece" in Michael Holroyd's introduction to the book.²⁴ Indeed, there are several superlatives to highlight for *A Month in the Country*.

The genius of *A Month in the Country* is its overall simplicity, given that it tackles so many weighty issues in such a small space. The consistent themes of art, love, and fellowship provide guideposts for the reader to follow along in a book without chapters. It is a novel that delves into complex topics including religion, love, sexuality, hope, loss, finality, pariahs, war, and depression. The more likely outcome of this approach in so few pages would be an overwhelmed reader, but J.L. Carr successfully navigates these land mines by making the story about ordinary people going through life's travails in "an easy-going story" during the "candle-to-bed age."²⁵ As a result, the reader is not entirely lost in the depth of the matter.

Carr's vivid, succinct, and efficient prose provides a lesson in effective writing and further makes the seemingly complex story accessible to all. The description of the English countryside transplants you and arouses your senses.²⁶ His narrative of the flirting between Tom and Alice elicits the reader's memories of first love.²⁷ He even makes an old stove an intriguing and entertaining part of the story.²⁸ Carr's use of humor and irony take the edge off complex issues, even engaging in the timeless tradition of jabbing lawyers.²⁹

¹⁴ *Id.* at xxi (describing the author's intent for Tom Birkin's tone in telling his story).

¹⁵ *Id.* at 114.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 129.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 132.

¹⁸ Alfred Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam A.H.H.* Canto 27 (1849), available at <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/174603>. J.L. Carr does not mention these famous lines from Tennyson's poem, *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, but he does reference "Tennyson weather" as "drowsy, warm, unnaturally still." CARR, *supra* note 1, at 88.

¹⁹ CARR, *supra* note 1, at 35. Birkin states, "[W]e understood each other perfectly from the moment she flung open the door." *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.* at 28–29.

²¹ *Id.* at 77.

²² *Id.* at 97.

²³ *Id.* at 76.

²⁴ *Id.* at xvii. The book also won the Guardian prize, was reprinted many times, and was made into a film in 1987. *Id.* at xix. The Guardian prize is an award given by the British newspaper of the same name to one excellent work of fiction each year.

²⁵ *Id.* at xxi.

²⁶ *Id.* at 19 (vividly describing Tom Birkin's view of the landscape after his first morning in the belfry).

²⁷ *Id.* at 116.

²⁸ *Id.* at 10–11 (describing his mechanical fascination with the stove and interjecting humor by portraying the stove's manufacturers as akin to the "Hapsburgs of the stove world").

²⁹ *Id.* at 15 (mocking the solicitors's "pig-headed refusal" to pay out money until the will's conditions were fulfilled).

A Month in the Country expertly addresses the fleeting nature of happiness and the cruelty of time through precise use of language and imagery. The promise of youth is “when the pulse of living beats strong.”³⁰ That optimism fades, according to Tom Birkin, and “it is now or never; we must snatch at happiness as it flies.”³¹ Moon tells his friend, “You can only have this piece of cake once; you can’t keep on munching away at it.”³² Finally, Birkin looks back with regret on his missed opportunity with Alice that summer in Oxgodby: “So, in memory, it stays as I left it, a sealed room furnished by the past, airless, still, ink long dry on a put-down pen.”³³ J.L. Carr makes the complicated theme of time crystal-clear through his masterful writing, and pens a classic, emotional ending to the story.

The appeal to so many potential readers of *A Month in the Country* is the ability to relate to the emotions of a yearning to escape, a need for healing, lost opportunities, a chance of redemption, and the almighty power of hope and love. These themes are not unique to the British, but rather a human experience that makes the book so enticing.

IV. Flaws in the Brush Strokes

At its base, *A Month in the Country* is about ordinary humans dealing with everyday human struggles. As a result, there are bound to be flaws in the story, given it is a human endeavor. The book is, “like all truly great works of art, hammering you with its whole before *beguiling* you with its parts.”³⁴

J.L. Carr’s brief novel appears rushed in parts and leaves the reader yearning for more development. There is so much earth to plow for the author, and his efficient writing style helps him accomplish the mission in a short space; but many of the characters and side-stories beg for further ink to be spilled. For example, the appearance of Sergeant Milburn and the revelation that Moon was court-martialed for homosexuality seems stilted and forced.³⁵ The follow-on revelation that “things were never quite the same” between Birkin and Moon following the discovery of the court-martial is also not fleshed out accordingly.³⁶ Such an important development deserves more attention and breadth.

³⁰ *Id.* at 101.

³¹ *Id.* at 104.

³² *Id.* at 121.

³³ *Id.* at 135.

³⁴ *Id.* at 75 (emphasis added).

³⁵ *Id.* at 110–11. Sergeant Milburn was a fellow British veteran of the Great War who knew both Birkin and Moon.

³⁶ *Id.* at 112.

Readers may also be distracted or disappointed in parts of the book for several reasons. First, J.L. Carr inserts numerous references to art and literature that require either an art history degree or easy access to the internet. This ties back in with the theme of art; J.L. Carr was a lifelong teacher, but it makes for unnecessary speed bumps in the story.³⁷ The book is really a *tour de force* in the humanities, with all of the references and topics covered, but it assumes too much of the reader. Second, the book contains British idioms and forms of British English, as is expected from this author, which can be difficult to follow. Third, the book at times hovers over the line of heavy pessimism for Tom Birkin that may be inconsistent with other aspects of the book, or stray from a more uplifting theme. Fourth, and finally, the book is slow at times for even its chosen subject matter.

Ultimately, like a fine work of art, the minor flaws in the book’s brush strokes blend in to the background as you examine the majestic whole. *A Month in the Country* is much too valuable as a whole to be undone by its few flawed parts.

V. Application to the Military

A small British work of fiction published in 1980 is not the obvious choice for a current leader’s recommended reading list, but *A Month in the Country* is a deceptively useful book for the military, including judge advocates.³⁸

The U.S. military has been engaged in combat operations for twelve years, and the stress of military service has placed a strain on servicemembers and families. As a result, the Army has initiated a Ready and Resilient Campaign demonstrating the Army’s commitment to building resiliency.³⁹ The Army has instructed its leaders to “continuously execute activities and events that build resiliency and promote education” of mental health issues and the risk of suicide while reducing the stigma.⁴⁰

The Chief of Staff of the Army’s leader expectations include “building agile, effective, high-performing teams”

³⁷ *Id.* at xiv–xv (describing J.L. Carr’s career as a teacher, including time spent in South Dakota, and his work as an artist).

³⁸ Judge advocates and their legal office teammates are not immune to the stress of military service. Judge advocates are also officers and leaders. As Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story once commented, the lawyer should not feel enough is done if he simply has mastered the law, but the lawyer “should addict himself to the study of philosophy, of rhetoric, and of *human nature*. It is from the want of this enlarged view of duty the profession has sometimes been reproached” Joseph Story, *The Value and Importance of Legal Studies*, Miscellaneous Writings of Joseph Story 527 (William W. Story ed. 1852) (emphasis added).

³⁹ ALARACT Message, 211/2013, *supra* note 7.

⁴⁰ *Id.*

and developing “bold, adaptive, and broadened leaders.”⁴¹ Part of leadership is knowing your subordinates and understanding human nature to spot the signs of unseen wounds. A leader’s subordinates and teammates in a military unit may have psychological wounds that require identification and treatment.

A Month in the Country is a useful tool for a leader, including judge advocates, looking to build an agile, effective team; learn about subordinates; and promote the Ready and Resilient Campaign. The short book easily lends itself to a professional development event with plenty of relevant topics to discuss.⁴²

Members of the military and their families can relate to *A Month in the Country* and the desire to escape for healing. Many of those stressed and wounded by service attempt to escape to their own Oxgodby. For example, Bethany Beach, Delaware, rolls out the red carpet for military families affected by the country’s last twelve years of war.⁴³ The town welcomes “Wounded Warriors” and provides gift baskets, kayaks, fishing boats, horses, jet skis, and lodging.⁴⁴ Attendees note that “there is no therapy like talking to someone else with PTSD”—a fellowship comment that could easily have come from Tom Birkin or Charles Moon.⁴⁵

VI. Conclusion

A Month in the Country delivers a complex, relevant, and enjoyable message in a small package. The book’s short list of technical flaws is outweighed by its overall artistic quality and is a must-read. While J.L. Carr’s novel based in the English countryside in 1920 may not be an obvious choice on first impression, a quick read unlocks lessons that any adaptable leader in today’s military can put into practice.

J.L. Carr’s *A Month in the Country* should be listed among the noteworthy literary and artistic exports from Britain to America; but, more importantly, perhaps it can lead to that “haven of calm water” and “new start” for at least one servicemember or family member in the United States.⁴⁶

⁴¹ ADP 6-22, *supra* note 8, *Foreword*.

⁴² Topics range from identifying and discussing psychological wounds, the value in fellowship with servicemembers, perceived social dislocation of servicemembers from the general public (being an outsider), dealing with loss, the importance of renewal, and much more.

⁴³ Petula Dvorak, *Bethany Beach Rolls Out the Red Carpet for Military Families*, WASH. POST, Sept. 5, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/bethany-beach-rolls-out-the-red-carpet-for-military-families/2013/09/05/2cecbab6-1648-11e3-be6e-dc6ae8a5b3a8_print.html.

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ *Id.*

⁴⁶ CARR, *supra* note 1, at 20.