

The Beauty and the Sorrow: An Intimate History of the First World War¹

Reviewed by Lieutenant Commander David M. Sherry*

It may be that the only value to mankind coming out of World War I was to provide the ultimate test of what human beings can endure under monstrously inhuman conditions and yet maintain their humanity.²

I. Introduction

Wars are led by nations, but endured by people. World War I impacted millions,³ and there are countless individual stories of heroism, adventure, patriotism, and simple survival from the conflict. Yet in teaching the history of war, these types of stories are often forgotten or buried in the mire of the larger themes of leadership, strategy, and international engagement. While the grand lessons are vital, the individual stories are just as important. They provide essential understanding and context for how and why major historical events occurred. True students of history must seek out these accounts. If the right stories are found, not only are they engaging, but they provide a deeper understanding of the roots of significant events.

In *The Beauty and the Sorrow: An Intimate History of the First World War*, Swedish historian Peter Englund⁴ provides the opportunity to learn and appreciate history through the individual accounts of those who experienced it. He presents World War I through the stories of twenty different people who endured the hostilities.⁵ There is a German sailor, an American doctor, a Hungarian cavalryman, a Belgian pilot, a Scottish nurse, and fifteen others of varying nationalities and from all sides of the conflict.⁶ In gathering their stories, Englund's goal is not to re-tell a precise history of the war, but to convey what it felt like to be in the middle of the conflict.⁷ The author's concentration is not on great lessons in leadership, military strategy, or other similar themes typically addressed in

historical books.⁸ Rather, the work focuses squarely on what individuals experienced under the utter turmoil of total war.⁹ With this refreshing approach he has created a history book that, in spite of minor flaws, is equally entertaining and educational.

II. Positives—There Are Many

A. Technical Aspects

From a technical standpoint, the book is excellent. The individual stories are clearly told through direct quotes and summarized journal accounts that are interspersed with historical context collected from secondary sources.¹⁰ The book moves seamlessly from a diary account style to a more formal prose and vice versa, providing both emotion and information without losing the tremendous effect of either.¹¹ His discussion of the funeral of Canadian John McCrea in France provides a superb example of this style in action. Englund first educates the reader on McCrea's importance as the drafter of the famous World War I poem *In Flanders Fields*, and then provides a moving image of the funeral via the words of Harvey Cushing, the American doctor, that describe battle guns fired coincidentally as McCrea is lowered into the ground.¹²

The author is also very proficient at succinctly explaining military history, tactics, and technology, which assists the reader in understanding the journal accounts.¹³ In each case the background information is just the right length and always enhances the reader's understanding of what is transpiring. His experience as a historian, member of the Swedish military, and years as a war correspondent no doubt make this an easy task.¹⁴ As he provides this information,

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¹ PETER ENGLUND, *THE BEAUTY AND THE SORROW: AN INTIMATE HISTORY OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR* (2011).

² JOSEPH E. PERISCO, *ELEVENTH MONTH, ELEVENTH DAY, ELEVENTH HOUR* (2004).

³ The Great War, as it is also known, involved twenty nations from five continents. *Id.* at xviii.

⁴ PETER ENGLUND, http://www.peterenglund.com/english_top.htm (last visited May 8, 2013).

⁵ ENGLUND, *supra* note 1, at xii.

⁶ *Id.* at xv–xvi (presenting a list of all persons followed throughout the book).

⁷ *Id.* at xii.

⁸ *See id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *See id.* at 431–32.

¹¹ *See id.*

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *See id.* at 449 (listing one example of dozens throughout the book where the author gives an excellent synopsis of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty between Germany and the Bolsheviks as part of the background on how Andrei Lobanov-Rostovsky, the Russian army engineer, came to fight under the French army).

¹⁴ *See* ENGLUND, *supra* note 4.

Englund does a marvelous job avoiding excessive and unnecessary political history and technical jargon.¹⁵

The level of research is impressive; the author utilizes over 150 primary and secondary sources from multiple international works to develop each person's account.¹⁶ This comprehensive level of investigation led to many gems one would not expect to find in a study of World War I: the American doctor who enters the war to gain more medical experience,¹⁷ the Australian ambulance driver in the Serbian army,¹⁸ the Danish soldier in the German army,¹⁹ and many other diverse characters that show the depth of the research just by their presence in the book.

The quality of research is also evident in the diversity of events presented. There are, as to be expected, plenty of perspectives regarding noteworthy ground battles during the war.²⁰ But the author also found stirring observations on many other significant events related to the war, making the book that much more enjoyable. The accounts of Rafael de Nogales, an Ottoman army officer during the Armenian genocide, are shocking and highly informative,²¹ and the description of Cushing's ocean transit through the bodies and wreckage of the RMS *Lusitania* provides a poignant reminder of America's impetus to enter the war.²² Among the vastness of the conflict, he has even found characters who have come nearly halfway around the world and managed to almost cross paths.²³ It was simply amazing to see how, after all his travels, Rafael de Nogales was resting on the Tigris River while at the same time Edward Mousley, a British artilleryman from New Zealand, was enduring a bombardment just on the horizon at Kut al-Amara in Mesopotamia.²⁴

¹⁵ See ENGLUND, *supra* note 1, at 174–77 (providing just the right amount of information on the status of the war between Austria-Hungary and Serbia to set the stage for Pal Kelemen, the Hungarian cavalryman, pursuing the retreating Serbian forces).

¹⁶ *Id.* at 509–14.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 97–98.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 127, 331.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 29–30.

²⁰ See *id.* at 267 (where American doctor Harvey Cushing gives his observations on the war at Ypres, Belgium); see also *id.* at 398–99 (where British soldier Edward Mousley discusses the British surrender at Kut al-Amara).

²¹ See *id.* at 111–15.

²² See *id.* at 357.

²³ *Id.* at 222.

²⁴ *Id.* at xvi, 222.

B. Entertainment and Learning Aspects

The organization of the book is deceptively superb and contributes to its easy flow. At first glance it may appear that arranging a war tale chronologically, as done here, is a simple task; however, the author has tackled a sweeping scope—he set out to follow twenty characters through four years of the war and managed to give their accounts in a compelling fashion that allowed the pace of the book to proceed like a good fiction novel. The tension for most characters builds as the war progresses and does not end until the reader learns the fate of each person.²⁵ Following this format helps propel the narrative forward and adds to the feeling that this is not simply a history book.

Although the author's intent is to knit together as many individualized experiences as possible,²⁶ there is quite a bit of interesting and fun historical knowledge²⁷ present in the book as well. Not only is quality of the historical information terrific, but the style in which it is presented is noteworthy as well. It all neatly fits with the character accounts when provided as backdrop and context. As the characters reach certain points in their stories, the author takes the opportunity to pass along relevant historical information that augments the reader's picture of what these chosen narrators experienced. An excellent example is the presentation of the new Russian tactics used in the Brusilov offensive as they became relevant to the experiences of Russian soldier Andrei Lobanov-Rostovsk.²⁸ Englund flawlessly accomplishes this throughout the book with multiple characters,²⁹ and each time he avoids the appearance of simply forcing the background information in. His style works in synergy with the first person accounts to bring the history to life—it is in these moments in which the book is at its best.

²⁵ The story of pilot Willie Coppens is a good example of this progression. The reader experiences his transition from trainee, to decorated pilot, and finally to an amputee uncertain of what the world holds for him when the war is over. See *id.* at 190–92, 257–59, 456–57, 504.

²⁶ *Id.* at xii.

²⁷ See, e.g., *id.* at 300 (explaining that the builders of the tank attempted to keep its purpose secret by describing it as a “water tank” carrying water to troops and the “description stuck” as its nomenclature).

²⁸ *Id.* at 294–96 (educating the reader on the significance of Alexi Brusilov and his unorthodox approach to warfare that allowed the Russians to make significant territorial advances in 1916).

²⁹ *Id.* at 19–21 (noting, as Lobanov-Rostovski describes his experience on a train, the new developments in railroad logistics which both modernized warfare and contributed to the tensions between Germany and Russia).

III. Downsides—There Are a Few

A. Lack of Geographic Aids

The complete absence of a map to assist the reader with following the characters is the only major disappointment. With the amount of people, areas, and time covered, only readers with an intimate knowledge of European, African, and Middle Eastern historical geography could understand where the characters were located at all times.³⁰ Margaret Macmillan's *Paris 1919: Six Months that Changed the World* contains a comprehensive set of maps that serve as an outstanding example of what visual information should accompany a book with such great geographic scope.³¹ Knowing the locations of the characters is crucial to evaluating their experience—in particular the effect of their travels and surroundings upon their viewpoints. Mentioning the location of a city in the text is not enough;³² there is no substitute for visualizing the region in the context of the surrounding territory. The author may have left them out in an effort to ensure technical items did not take away from his emotional focus; however, maps need not take away from the personal tone of a historical work.

B. Other Minor Improvements

The book contains extensive narratives from many characters under the precept of providing a complete view of World War I. There is, however, a notable absence of perspective in certain aspects of the conflict. This is most visible in the naval realm. At the start of the book, it is expected that German sailor Richard Stumpf will provide a naval viewpoint,³³ as he is the only nautical representative in the narration. He spent most of the war out of the action, and even when he experiences an event worth discussing (the Battle of Jutland), he only offers a brief and unsatisfying account.³⁴ Englund should have chosen a German U-Boat sailor or different ship crewmember to expound more on what seagoing life was like during the war. In his review of the book, critic Geoff Dyer also comments on this

³⁰ The lack of a map is most notable during the discussions on Africa. There are generalized discussions of territorial aims on this continent throughout the book, but without a map to reference, the reader is lost. *See id.* at 149–50 (discussing the strategic accomplishments and goals of the Germans, French, and British as a backdrop for Angus Buchanan's deployment to East Africa).

³¹ *See* MARGARET MACMILLAN, *PARIS 1919: SIX MONTHS THAT CHANGED THE WORLD*, at introductory maps (2003).

³² *See* ENGLUND, *supra* note 1, at 180 (E.g., where the author does happen to mention Salonica is in Greece.)

³³ *See id.* at 11–14.

³⁴ *Id.* at 259–60. Stumpf, however, does provide useful insight into German domestic unrest at the end of the war. *Id.* at 429–31.

phenomenon on a larger scale, noting that character choices can lead to the reader missing the opportunity to learn about significant events.³⁵

Other characters might feel unnecessary to the reader and at times slow the pace without much benefit. Scottish nurse Sarah Macaughtan is the best example of this.³⁶ She is certainly admirable for wanting to assist people in need during the war.³⁷ But her entries are short, are not accompanied by extensive or interesting background material, and do not provide much effect that the reader would not obtain from other characters.³⁸ She is another example reflecting the need to ensure correct character choice in this type of book. Notably, Englund himself understands the importance of character selection.³⁹ For various translations of the book, he inserted a few different characters that he expected would appeal more to readers of a particular country.⁴⁰ In line with this, he should also consider replacing duplicative and uninteresting characters like Macaughtan in future publications.

Two other minor flaws are worthy of brief mention. First, because the secondary and primary source material are intermingled so well, and because the sources are only cited at the end, it is impossible to know whether or not the author is presuming the thoughts of the characters when he writes what they are thinking.⁴¹ It is assumed he is not doing this; whenever the author puts forth the beliefs or direct thoughts of a character, that statement is usually accompanied by sufficient context to support the notion that the sentiment

³⁵ *Geoff Dyer on Unusual Histories*, FIVE BOOKS, <http://fivebooks.com/interviews/geoff-dyer-on-unusual-histories?page=full> (last visited May 8, 2013).

³⁶ Michael Corday is another example. As the only civil servant in the book, one would hope for more insight into non-military government perspectives from him, but the majority of his observations simply center on civilian life during the war. While his observations are unique, an opportunity was missed by not including commentary on the political process during the war from a different politician. *See, e.g.*, ENGLUND, *supra* note 1, at 282 (providing a typical example of Corday's contributions (where he states his observations on prostitution)).

³⁷ *See id.* at 26.

³⁸ *Compare id.* at 37–38 (showing a typical Macaughtan entry via her experience as a nurse in Antwerp), *with id.* at 210–13 (describing Florence Farmborough's experience as a nurse after a failed Russian raid and detailing interesting background regarding war casualties and other information).

³⁹ PETER ENGLUND, http://www.peterenglund.com/beauty_and_sorrow_FAQ.htm (last visited May 8, 2013).

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ *See* ENGLUND, *supra* note 1, at 98 (discussing Cushing's opinions on the Germans and stating Cushing's belief that "He thinks he can see through the empty pathos.").

was not invented by the author.⁴² An explanation of how the author managed this process would bolster the faith of the reader that the he is stating the direct beliefs of the subjects.⁴³

Lastly, the title itself is a bit misleading. There is very little beauty in the book, unless the word is also meant to be a metaphorical reference to the beauty of the persevering human spirit.⁴⁴ There is adventure, personal growth, and great infatuation with the war⁴⁵—but even the book’s jacket liner states that there is only occasional beauty present.⁴⁶ A better title may have been “The Awe and the Sorrow,” which reflects the sentiments of the characters toward the war and the impressive situations they encountered during their experiences.

IV. Conclusion

The work is overall a great success. Mr. Englund has crafted a book that is essential to any serious history student’s full understanding of this conflict and the impacts of war on the individual and beyond. But it is far more than that—he has created a work that fans of military tactics and political history can enjoy just as much as those simply looking for a good story. The flaws are few in proportion to the positives. They are not raised to argue that the book is not enjoyable or excellent overall, but merely to say it would have been even better without them.

Remaining true to his purpose, the author ends the book by merely telling the reader the characters’ final thoughts at the close of the war. There is no ultimate analysis, no grand lesson learned, and no theme that emerges suddenly at the end. The individual experiences themselves are the lesson. The knowledge gained from this book regarding how the war impacted those going through it at their level is important, for all great geopolitical events are inextricably tied to individual experience. Effects on individuals can lead to drastic impacts on the larger world. Students of the past should seek to learn about these individual experiences and perspectives to supplement their traditional textbook knowledge; the author’s book provides an excellent vehicle for this undertaking. The envoi providing Hitler’s reaction to the armistice is the ultimate example Englund uses to highlight the importance of personal perceptions and experiences in relation to larger historical events.⁴⁷ In his own words, Hitler describes how his personal disappointment with the conditions of the armistice drove him into politics.⁴⁸ Look no further than this for a better argument in support of the need to learn about individual wartime experiences.

⁴² See *id.* at 88–89 (stating that nurse Florence Farmborough is afraid of the Russian troops she is with, and the reader can find it easy to believe this is her genuine sentiment, given the description of harassment she is enduring).

⁴³ Contrast the absence of such an explanation with Perisco’s work. See PERISCO, *supra* note 2, at xvi (noting that he only used phrases in his book explaining what the speaker thought or believed when it was clear from the primary source that the sentiment reflected was what the character actually thought or believed).

⁴⁴ See ENGLUND, *supra* note 1, at 290 (showing one of the few times a character is able to note the beauty of the land around him).

⁴⁵ See *id.* at 126 (pointing out Olive King’s sense of adventure and need for change as factors leading her to the war); see also *id.* at 260 (expressing Richard Stumpf’s excitement during and after the Battle of Jutland).

⁴⁶ *Id.* at front jacket notes.

⁴⁷ See *id.* at 507–08.

⁴⁸ *Id.* (quoting ADOLF HITLER, MEIN KAMPF (1925)) (“[W]e had lost the war and were now dependent on the mercy of the victors our Fatherland would be exposed to harsh oppression and the fact was that the armistice would result in us having to rely on the nobility of our former enemies—at that point I could take no more. It was impossible for me to remain there. Everything went blank before my eyes and I fumbled my way back to the dormitory, threw myself down on my bed and buried my burning face in the covers and pillows. . . . The days that followed this were horrible and the nights worse—I knew that everything was lost. One would have had to be a simpleton—or a liar and criminal—to hope for mercy from the enemy. My hatred grew during these nights, my hatred for those responsible for this evil deed. During the days that followed I recognised [sic] what my mission was to be . . . I decided to become a politician.”).