

Joanna Bourke. *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in 20th-Century Warfare.* London and New York: Granta Press, 1999. vii + 564pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-86207-214-5; \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-465-00738-7.



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"It is well that war is so terrible, we should grow too fond of it." Robert E. Lee acknowledged the fact that some people could find enjoyment in some aspects of war but recognized that, at its core, war is horrible. Joanna Bourke adopts another approach, arguing that ordinary men and women, freed from conventional constraints on social behavior, find intense pleasure in the act of killing. She asserts that the existence of a state of war legitimizes killing, unleashing a primal, even erotic, joy in the act.

Reader in History at Birkbeck College, University of London, Joanna Bourke is a cultural historian with a particular interest in gender issues. Winner of the Fraenkel Prize in Contemporary History for this book, she writes about men in combat as an outsider looking in. This is a position which, for the most part, is very comfortable to adopt.

Based on accounts of the experiences of Australian, British and U.S. servicemen during the two World Wars and the Vietnam War, this book has already received wide publicity and an extremely positive reception in some circles. Professor Richard Overy, the respected British historian, has called it an "extraordinary tour de force" and the product of "massive scholarship." Released at a time when we witness, once again, man's potential for barbarism in the killing fields of Kosovo, the author claims "to put killing back in military history," suggest-

ing that excitement, joy and satisfaction in slaughter are every society's dirty secret.

Undeniably, this is a challenging and shocking work, drawing on an extensive selection of battlefield stories, most of which revel in carnage. As Bourke warns, the subject matter is traumatizing—it is hard not to feel soiled by some of the accounts.

History of this type has a heavy responsibility for exposing fundamental aspects of the human condition. Given that duty, it is troubling that this is an incomplete, one-eyed work. It is also badly edited, with a number of incorrect phrases and spelling errors displaying unfamiliarity with the basic subject matter. Utilizing a highly selective approach to her sources, Bourke falls back on tired stereotypes of the soldier as bloodthirsty murderer and attempts to make every killing in war an atrocity. While the traumatic experience of researching the book was almost "unbearable" for the author, she allows no such luxury to her subjects. Her "ordinary killers" are little affected by the act of killing and re-absorb into society with few psychological scars. Apparently the burden of killing is a relatively light one.

Usually, a historian claiming to challenge an established view considers how other authorities have dealt with the subject. Bourke virtually ignores inconvenient

and contradictory arguments and constructs her own discourse in a vacuum. Professor Dave Grossman's classic 1995 Pulitzer prize-nominated study, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, does not rate a mention. Neither is John Keegan's work on the nature of battle considered, and Richard Holmes's groundbreaking study on the subject is only mentioned in passing.

The failure to consider contemporary psychological literature makes this a curious work of history. Bourke furthers her arguments with blithe assertions while neglecting more empirically based studies. Using the substantial historical material available, Grossman made a case that the modern Western soldier has been conditioned to become a more effective killer than at any time in history. That this has come at substantial individual and social psychological cost has been borne out by the dramatic increase in post-traumatic stress casualties in the age of industrial warfare. Bourke, on the other hand, appears to construct an artificial moral universe in which the combatant as killer and the combatant as victim can be easily distinguished. As a result, the context in which she constructs her narratives seems far removed from the reality of war.

Rather than presenting battle as the chaotic mess we know it to be, Bourke concentrates on the act of killing. Without the distraction of actual circumstances, the reader is presented with successive one-dimensional renderings of battle as a series of similar encounters. Though admitting that face-to-face fighting is now relatively rare, Bourke allows it to form the basis for her analysis of men in combat. Even then, she appears unaware that such encounters occur between exhausted, terrified, hungry, filthy and often physically sick individuals immersed in the carnage of the direct-fire battlefield. This is not the realm of eroticism; this is closer to hell.

Most damning from the historical perspective is Bourke's failure to discriminate between first-hand accounts, literary sources, and anti-war polemics. She invokes sources as disparate as fiction, drama and "letters from the front." Much of it falls into the category of what Richard Holmes calls "military pornography," the sort of literature that is lapped up by a public eager for titillation and violence by proxy. As Dr. Michael Evans argued at the recent Canberra conference titled "The Human Face of Warfare," "the paradox of those doing the fighting but not doing the writing has meant that the soldier's war has been a secret war." To understand this hidden aspect of military history, the author needs to make more

informed judgments about the evidentiary value of different types of narratives.

Greater familiarity with the secondary literature might have helped. Robin Gerster's *Big-Noting* established "porkies" as a constant theme in war memoirs, and Michael Herr, author of *Despatches*, commented that after battle one is perfectly free to "make up any kind of bullshit." Bourke fails to take the braggart factor into account and invests too much value in the foolish, puffed-up letters of inexperienced young men to their girlfriends and families. Similarly, the scar that Vietnam left on the American psyche produced some ugly literary and cinematic excrescences, but they too need to be seen in context and not viewed as historical reality.

Those familiar with war literature will question the way the historian's craft is manipulated by Bourke. Sam Damon, hero of Anton Myrer's anti-militarist novel *Once an Eagle* is quoted as a living character, and to add insult to injury, the "quote" selected reflects an attitude quite out of character with his (fictional) persona. In a similar vein, Gary McKay, author of "In Good Company," is depicted as being disappointed and morose that his first kill in Vietnam did not live up to the movies. Reading his graphic and honest account of the event, McKay does not appear to demonstrate those sentiments. Instead, he is awed and almost transfixed until further shooting forces him to concentrate on the command of his platoon.

>From my experience of teaching military history, I am sure that this book will get a great deal of mileage in some university courses. It purports to show soldiers, and the society that produces them, as enthusiastic killers. The fact that Australian, British and U.S. troops are targeted relieves the reader from the uncomfortable problem of considering moral and cultural relativities. Bourke's argument is also terribly one-sided. If our own boys are capable of such atrocities, then perhaps the SS, the Japanese Army and the Serbian militias are just another aspect of the same problem. The idea that different cultures and different eras truly do possess widely varied attitudes to killing is not recognized. Nor do we see the ordinary men who live amongst us still haunted by the memories of what we once asked them to do.

Clearly we all approach events with a different perspective, and the military historian has a particular problem recreating the extreme emotions experienced in battle. Battlefield narratives can be constructed from any number of sources, but will they be accurate? The reader might take heed of General Sir Ian Hamilton's warning that "on the actual day of the battle naked truths may be

picked up for the asking: by the following morning they have already begun to get into their uniforms.”

*An earlier version of this review was published in “The Weekend Australian” newspaper.

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