The Engineer's Bookshelf

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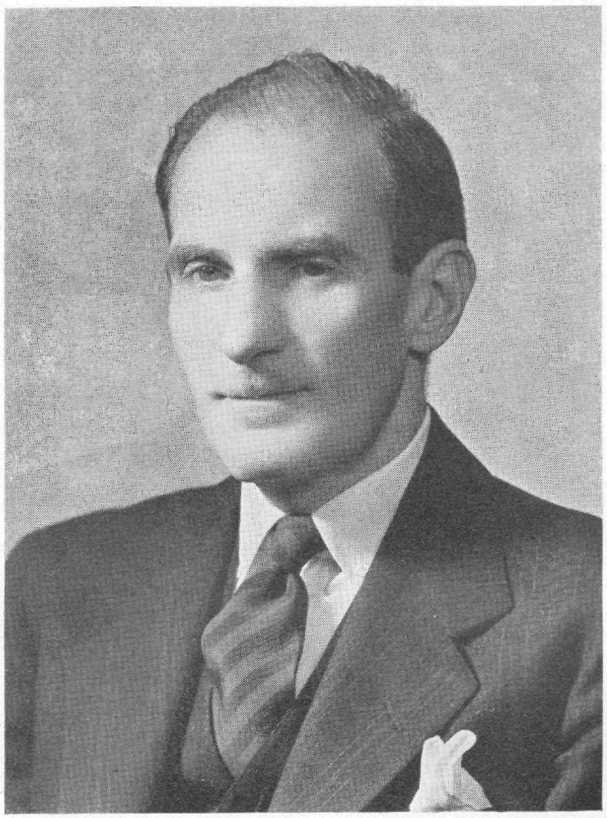

Professor Dumble

War Literature: Then and Now

Miss Amy Loveman writing in the September 7 issue of The Saturday Review of Literature bemoans that "A full year has passed since the onset of the war, and no great literature has been born of it as yet." We have no poetry, she comments, comparable to that from the pen of Rupert Brooke, or from Siegfried Sassoon and Richard Aldington. And we have no war novel like Mr. H. G. Wells' "Mr. Britling Sees It Through."

Quite so, Miss Loveman, quite so! And I am wondering why. Why has no member of the British Royal Air Force given us the splendid war poetry that came from Rupert Brooke between the time of his enlistment in 1914 and the day of his tragic death off the coast of Greece in 1916? Why has no novelist like, say, Sir Hugh Walpole given us a good war novel? When Mr. Wells wrote "Mr. Britling" in 1917, he was about the same age of Sir Hugh at the present time. Why, I ask; why?

Of course we have had books about the present war, books that make the dullest possible reading. For example there is Mr. Hitler's "Mein Kampf", and there is Sir Nevile Henderson's "The Failure of a Mission". Neither one makes exciting reading. Neither one demands your attention and keeps you interested to the extent that the book must be finished before you put it down. Are there no young poets in Britain's flying units; are all the older novelists drinking tea in their air raid shelters? I do not know, and if I did know, probably I would hesitate to say.

But there is one thing I do know: Despite the few splendid poems by Rupert Brooke and despite the Wells' novel of 1917, the best literature about World War No. 1 came some ten years after the Armistice was signed in November 1918. For literature about World War No. 1 falls into three distinct groups. There were those books, for example, that were published between the years 1914 and 1918. In them, despite their enlistment propaganda, war was, in the main, a highly amusing business, a kind of jolly sporting affair interspersed with occasional tragedy and pathos, always touched with the heroic.

Then came the days about 1925 when glory turned to "What Price Glory?", when the characters were rarely good natured and were generally bestial. All the grim sides of the conflict were accented in these books, and the soldiers died in vain for a lost cause. Not infrequently were their burials turned into slapstick comedy episodes, and all the mourners after the services sought the nearest cafe where they could get cognac to drown their sorrows, if any.

Then, came a third kind of World War novel, the kind that made an interpretation of the inner meaning of the machine known as war, the kind exemplified by Mr. Hemingway's "A Farewell to Arms." This group of war novels is probably the best of all three groups, because in them the mere historical recordings of the physical facts are passed up for a deeper meaning of the whole affair.

This all goes to show that man must be removed by at least ten or fifteen years from the conflict if he is to do a splendid job in writing a war novel. Was that not the case in Stephen Crane's "The Red Badge of Courage"? The Crane novel, probably the best story of our own Civil War which came to a conclusion in 1865, was not written until 1895. Therefore, we may have to wait until 1970 before we get the best novel about the present conflict.

But this does not answer Miss Loveman's question about the dirth of present war literature. And I believe that she has a right to ask the question; and as far as I can see there is no satisfactory answer to it.

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THE ENGINEER'S BOOKSHELF

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Heaven forbid that we get now the same kind of war literature that was produced in 1914 to 1918, with the exception, however, of a few poems by the gentlemen named at the beginning of this article.

Vividly I recall the drivel published during those years. I remember how in 1917 everybody was reading Donald Hankey's "Student in Arms", a diary of a young British soldier definitely designed to promote enlistment. Surely it was anything but literature. I remember Miss Huard's "My Home on the Field of Honour" also published in 1917. The title itself indicates the sentiment put forth in the book. At the Victoria Station in London in 1918, I recall buying a paper back copy of a book by Miss Ellen LaMotte called "The Backwash of War". Its publication date was 1916, and in it the author, a Red Cross nurse, recounted her experiences in a field hospital. Also I recall a tragic little tale entitled "Missing" by Mrs. Humphrey Ward. I bought that one at the news shop in the railway station in Le Mans, France, one bleak October day in 1918. It is still on my bookshelves, and despite the fact that it is not literature, for some reason I don't care to part with it. All of these mentioned volumes have nothing more in them than the recordings of war incidents and happenings, both joyous and sad, and they make no attempt to give an interpretation of the happenings.

So, we are waiting for the day when World War No. 2 will give us a really great novel. It won't come tomorrow or next week or next year. It may come five or ten years from now, and when it does come it will be from the pen of the little man, the airplane mechanic at Croyden, the member of the Home Guard Unit in Essex, or from the woman whose children were killed in a September raid on Bayswater. For those are the people who are winning this War, as win they must if the English speaking races are to continue on the earth. Remember that an unknown London accountant gave us "Journey's End"; he is Mr. R. C. Sherriff. Remember that the fourth man in the rear rank gave us "All Quiet on the Western Front"; he is Eric Remarque. And remember that an unknown American soldier fighting the cause in Italy's army gave us "A Farewell to Arms"; he is Ernest Hemingway.

And so, Miss Loveman, if you and I and others of our generation live long enough, we shall live to see a really great war novel.

Shades of Physical Chemistry

Molecule: Pardon, but haven't we met before?

Miss Electron: I don't know you from Atom.

Ma: Where's the cow, Johnny?

Johnny: I can't get her home; she's down by the railroad track flirting with the tobacco sign.