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Echoes and Shadows: Creative Interferences from World War II

Roderick Watson

- 1 This essay is a personal reflection on how reverberations from the Second World War have marked my childhood, and my own creative writing. I am also speaking for the shared experience of a particular generation of boys and men (the masculine bias is relevant) who grew up in the years after 1945 subject to the reinterpretations and distortions of a popular culture that glorified war. I will also offer some critical reflections on the part played by these acts of communal remembering and forgetting in the construction of modern British identity.
- 2 I was born in Aberdeen on the North-East coast of Scotland on 12 May 1943. This was “Black May”, when U boats were being sunk in the battle of the Atlantic, and the surrender of the Afrika Corps brought the Desert Campaign to an end. In Warsaw the ghetto uprising was savagely crushed and thousands of Jews were killed or sent to the camps. In Germany the RAF “Dam busters” attacked the Mohne and Eder dams, while the Allies were bombing Sardinia in the Mediterranean, as a feint for the invasion of Italy—actually planned for Sicily. The war was beginning to turn, but it was far from over.
- 3 I am, in a sense, a war baby, but can make no claim to the suffering and the trauma of so many thousands of babies and children who, even though they were lucky enough to survive the war, had to grow up in the ruins of Europe, Russia, Africa, Japan and the Middle East. In fact the war did not really touch me as a boy until the late '40s and '50s, when it came in lurid and paradoxically shadowy forms: simultaneously trivial, exciting and disturbing.
- 4 I remember ration books, because we used to play with those now finally redundant food stamps. I remember Anderson air-raid shelters squeezed into back gardens, and I played with the big bolts that fixed the Morrison shelters, which were steel tables designed for families to cower beneath. I remember the thrill of hearing Spitfire engines in the sky, and the concrete machine gun pillboxes along the coast of Aberdeen, exciting to explore, and marked in later years by rusting barbed wire and the reek of stale urine. I owned an enviably large collection of spent 303 calibre brass cartridges. Everyone of my generation

played with old gas masks. Their satchels were really good for carrying sandwiches and a thermos flask.

- 5 My father was a scientist so his was a reserved occupation during the war, not subject to conscription, but I kept his distinctively yellow steel helmet for many years. He was gas protection officer for the North of Scotland in the early days of the war when gas attacks were surely expected to happen. One of his friends had been the navigator on a Lancaster bomber, and I remember admiring and lusting after the superior glamour of his RAF officer's cap, battered and faded blue.
- 6 On the 10th anniversary of the D-Day landings I pored over a large book of photographs specially published for the occasion. In a second-hand bookshop I bought a wartime issue of *Jane's Fighting Ships 1940*, a serious reference book on the world's navies, and I still have yellowing wartime booklets in my bookshelves, with instructions on *Enemy Aircraft Recognition* and useful tips from *Invasion Tactics* in the pioneering style of *Scouting for Boys*:

Cooking on Hand-grenades

If you want to make a fire without being seen, and have no wood, but some German hand grenades of the stick-grenade type, try this:

Unscrew the stick and take out the little metal detonator inside. Now you can see the explosive [. . .] take the powder of a German cartridge (it is forbidden and not always advisable to use your own) after removing the bullet, and pour it into the grenade. You can safely ignite the powder and with it the explosive of the grenade. It will burn with a long and lasting flame, and be sufficient to bring about four pints of water to the boil.

(Necker, 32.)

- 7 "Playing at war" was a major feature of my boyhood, and imagined battles between Brits and Germans (less commonly "Japs") were at least as popular as those between "Cowboys and Indians". (Political correctness begone!) As far as comic books go, I personally favoured rocket ships in the weekly *Eagle*, which was started in 1950, starring its front-page hero, the space-pilot Dan Dare and his attendant, the faithful batman Digby. (It seems the English class system was to be future-proof.) But I also read many titles from the hundreds of war comics that appeared on the British market in the mid to late 1950s, replete with useful German phrases such as "Achtung ! Spitfeuren !"
- 8 We know that the aftermath of war can be traumatic, for many of those who experienced it, whether as civilians or soldiers. We know that this was seldom spoken about at the time, and that thousands suffered in silence, or regarded their troubles with something approaching shame. So what can one make of the remarkable resurgence of war films and war stories in Britain in the 1950s? Was there an ideologically nationalist agenda here, or some sort of healing and remembering, by way of re-enactment? Or a combination of the two? Perhaps the war comics of my youth represented a bizarre return of the repressed, for the generation that drew them, by which the tragedies and futilities of history were being replayed, not as a farce, but in the rather jolly guise of triumphalist popular culture?
- 9 In her study of *The Presence of the Past: Memory, Heritage, and Childhood in Postwar Britain* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), Valerie Kripps adapts Pierre Nora's work on *lieux de mémoire*, "sites of memory" to note our cultural urge to identify or construct imaginative landmarks and objects, as icons of a glorious national past, and she links the rise of this

tendency in Britain to the decline of Empire and Britain's fading post-war standing, especially after the debacle of the Suez crisis in 1956.¹

- 10 From a similar perspective James Chapman's study, *British Comics: A Cultural History* has this to say about the period of my growing up:

How can we explain the surge in the popularity of war comics towards the end of the 1950s? John Sutherland suggests that by then "the war was far enough away for the pain to have receded but the glory was still fondly remembered". War comics can be seen as part of a cultural project to claim the "memory" of the Second World War for the generation of Britons born after the war had ended. (Chapman, 96.)

- 11 Chapman goes on to cite what he describes as "a boom in war-related fiction and non-fiction" at this time, and names over a dozen films in what he calls "a golden age for the war film in British cinema".² He goes on to note that:

War comics were also a major part of what Michael Paris has, appropriately, termed "the pleasure culture of war" in post-war Britain.³ They were one of the means that allowed children to experience something of the thrill and excitement of war without being exposed to its dangers. (Chapman, 97.)

- 12 He notes that recruiting material for the armed forces was included in these comics, alongside advertising for war toys. Nor did the titles of these weeklies hide their martial and imperial aspirations, with names such as *Eagle*, *Victor*, *Valiant*, *Lion*. Comics for girls from this period were equally popular if less numerous, and their titles—*Girl*, *School Friend* and *Bunty*—were designed to reinforce middle class aspirations and gender stereotypes, with tales of nurses, dancers, boarding schools and horsewomen. But these never matched the market for boys' war comics, which grew to hundreds of single-title graphic volumes, each telling specific tales of combat, mostly published by D. C. Thomson of Dundee and Alfred Harmsworth's Amalgamated Press in London, later to become Fleetway under the Mirror Group.

- 13 Here is James Chapman again:

The war issues of *Thriller Picture Library* proved so popular that Amalgamated Press launched *War Picture Library* in 1958. This was followed by other libraries from the same stable—*Air Ace Picture Library* (1960-70), *Battle Picture Library* (1961-84) and *War at Sea Picture Library* (1962-3)—by D. C. Thomson's *Commando* (1961-), and by several imitators from smaller publishers including Micron's *Combat Picture Library* (1959-85) and C. H. Pearson's *Picture Stories of World War II* (1960-5) and *Air War Picture Stories* (1961-2). At their height the picture libraries were each printing up to six new stories a month as well as reprints. Until they were discontinued in the mid-1980s, *War Picture Library* published 2,103 issues [ie: individual titles]; *Battle Picture Library* 1,706 issues and *Combat Picture Library* 1,212 issues, while *Commando*, which is still in print, passed 4,000 issues in 2007. (Chapman, 97.)

- 14 These are staggering numbers, and the political, ideological and gendering implications of such a national enterprise are particularly striking, not to say disturbing. It only remains to observe that the countries of Europe have not had anything like this level of popular juvenile fixation with World War II.

- 15 A few pictorial examples of this large and continuing commercial activity will suffice.

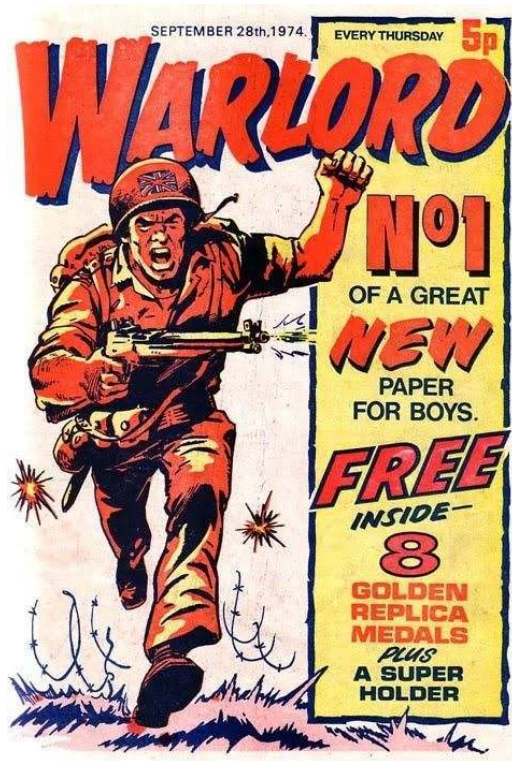
Fig. 1



© DC Thomson & Co Ltd 2017

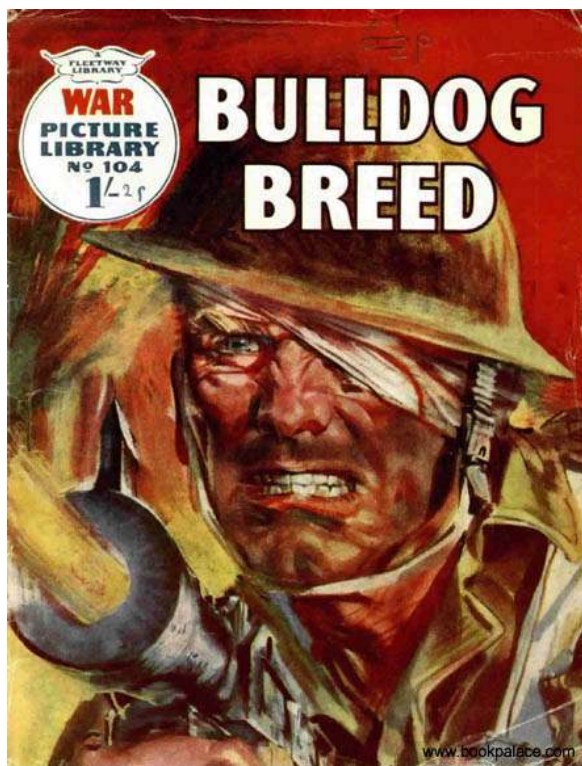
- 16 “Ramsay’s Raiders” seems to be an equal opportunity Commonwealth outfit since this supposed long-range desert group features troopers from England, Scotland and Australia. (More equal still, D. C. Thomson’s Commando series is now printed in Germany.)

Fig. 2



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Fig. 3



War Picture Library © Time Inc. UK

Fig. 4

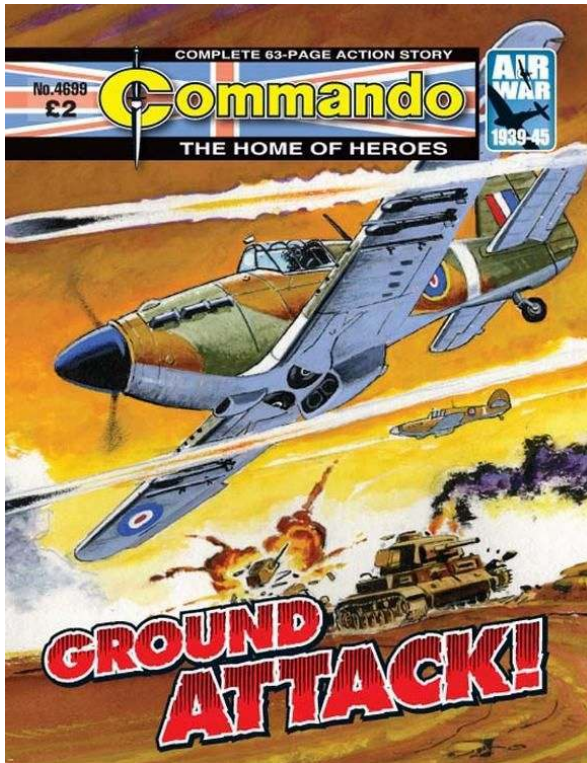


Fig. 5



© DC Thomson & Co Ltd 2017 Battle Copyright © Rebellion, used with permission

Fig. 6



© DC THOMSON & CO LTD 2017

- 17 “I Flew with Braddock”, appeared in comic strip format, but was mostly text-based, as here, in a series of tales supposedly recounted by George Bourne, his working class flight navigator. This allowed for more specific historical detail than was usual for the genre, but was notable for its portrait of Braddock as a non-commissioned officer (a flight sergeant) of extraordinary ability, notorious for his scruffy appearance and an absolute contempt for establishment authority. Here was a hero fit for the 1960s, in a trope that would become increasingly evident in cinema and popular culture as the decades progressed.⁴ Nevertheless the promotion of combat, courage and victory played a key part in the construction of British boyhood from the 50s to the 70s, if enlivened, in Braddock’s case, with a degree of class consciousness.
- 18 Such matters have not been confined to picture stories for boys, for the tales we tell ourselves from the second war still play a large part in the re-imagining of British national being. Beyond the school playground and the pulp fiction of our youth, the urge to reinhabit old stories of the Second World War has been a recurring feature in British culture, usually surfacing at moments of ideological misgiving or on the occasion of some notable anniversary.
- 19 Consider, for example, the narratives of national identity that have been constructed around the retreat from Dunkirk in 1940, with the moving story of “the little ships”, the fishing boats and pleasure craft that were recruited to the task. The 75th anniversary of the evacuation in 2015 was marked by a floating re-enactment of their journey, and a major Hollywood movie, directed by Christopher Nolan was released for a summer showing in 2017. Consider, too, the legendary and oft recounted drama of the “Battle of

- Britain” with the special and undeniable glamour of “the few” in their Spitfires and Hurricanes.
- 20 These have become foundational myths of modern British identity, in the same way that the suffering at Gallipoli in the First War became a foundational myth of national identity for Australia and New Zealand, as it also did, in its turn, for Kemal Atatürk’s modern Turkey. (Or, if you like, the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314, or the 1320 Declaration of Arbroath for modern Scottish politics.)
- 21 But there is always another side to such narratives, as Scottish historian Catriona Macdonald has pointed out, by remembering that the story of Dunkirk had an entirely different resonance in Scotland. The evacuation of Dunkirk was only made possible because 10,000 men of the 51st Highland Division were ordered to stay behind to fight a rearguard action—and be captured. Macdonald notes that “In many Scottish homes the memory of this betrayal lived on beyond 1945. [The novelist] Eric Linklater commented: ‘To Scotland the news came like another Flodden.’”⁵ (Macdonald, 111.)
- 22 There are many such counter-stories from the war that have not quite entered the popular imagination. Angus Calder’s groundbreaking study *The People’s War. Britain 1939-1945*, (first published in 1969) did much to illustrate this by recognising the social conflict that existed at the time, and the paradoxical ways in which the demands of total war overthrew the old conventions and shook the establishment (at least for a while) out of its unexamined privileges. Less than two months after the German surrender, after all, a widely felt need for social reform unseated Winston Churchill and led to the landslide victory for Labour in July 1945.
- 23 The narrative practices of remembering and forgetting, and the differences between individual memory and socially constructed memory, are rarely ideologically innocent. We seldom talk of the hundred of soldiers who stepped off their landing craft at Normandy and simply drowned. We seldom mention the thousands of young RAF pilots who crashed and died while learning to fly. (There were three thousand in Bomber Command alone.) We know, too, that the terrible ambiguities surrounding the bombing campaign meant that even in the heat of victory, the government decided not to award a campaign medal to that branch of the service. (To illustrate the power of different cultural contexts, I used to explain to students why the Baader Meinhoff terrorists, the Red Army Faction, chose those particular initials for their name. For civilians under bombardment in many German cities, the “*Terror flieger*” crews of the RAF lacked the charm of dear old Biggles, the pilot hero of so many boys’ books by “Capt. W. E. Johns”.)
- 24 The tales we tell ourselves about ourselves are always revealing, whether it takes the form of war comics for boys or the popular entertainment of so many British television programmes based on the second war. Tales of plucky, embattled Brits facing comic or dangerous foreigners have been a popular weekly standby in British entertainment or many years.⁶ It would not be difficult to argue that such cultural expressions have played a part in the rise of English nationalism that characterised the Brexit vote of 2017, nor should we underestimate the near contemporary conjunction of the notable and widely celebrated anniversaries of Dunkirk (75 years, 2015), D-Day (70 years, 2014), and Churchill’s funeral (50 years, 2015).
- 25 I find myself deeply conflicted by the state-sponsored ceremonies by which the “national sacrifice” of the First World War is memorialized by the very governments that caused it. The road to conflict in the Second World War was less ambiguous, but no less disturbing

in what amounts to the selective evasion of its true horrors by way of ceremonial ritual. With such thoughts in mind, I have come to think more closely about the ways in which the terrible echoes of the second war have entered my own imaginative life.

- 26 In 2013 I was asked to edit an anthology of Scottish war verse for the Association for Scottish Literary Studies and joined forces with Dr David Goldie from the University of Strathclyde to produce our anthology *From the Line: Scottish War Poetry 1914-1945*.⁷ This was one of many projects in Britain that were timed to coincide with the centenary 1914-2014. But we wanted to think a little beyond that particular remit by recognizing the shifts in personal response that have been reflected in the poetry of two world wars, along with the even more striking changes in how these two global conflicts were perceived, carried out and represented.
- 27 In England in the late 1930s, for example, and especially in Scotland, there was very little appetite for another war. The experience of 1914-18 had been deeply disillusioning, and although the need to defeat Hitler was ultimately inescapable, many left-wing Scottish poets and thinkers resented having to enlist in what they saw as yet another struggle between rival imperialisms. Cecil Day Lewis's poem "Where are the war poets?" spoke for many more in England when he regretted having to "defend the bad against the worst".
- 28 In thinking of further differences between the two wars, it seems to me that 1939-1945 saw the final ghastly apotheosis of "total war". Of course wars have always been bad news for civilian populations caught in the crossfire, but the increasing military importance of a nation's home-based industrial output, and the growing capacity for aerial bombardment in the twentieth century, led to something quite new.
- 29 It is darkly ironic that in the 1920s one of the early theorists of strategic bombing, the Italian general Giulio Douhet, saw it as a guarantee that the years of slaughter in the trenches of the First World War would never, ever happen again. He thought that the prospect of immediate and total destruction from the skies would encourage peace, or at least settle conflicts swiftly and totally. He was terribly wrong. Nevertheless the ghastly policy of Mutually Assured *atomic* Destruction that so marked the Cold War in the years after 1945 may just, perhaps, have proved him right.
- 30 It seems extraordinary that, as a species, we became willing to exterminate, in one stroke, thousands and thousands of civilian men, women and children in the supposed "defence" of our own beliefs in freedom, justice and humanity. As a teenager I read John Hersey's book on the survivors of Hiroshima and remember having recurrent dreams of nuclear extinction—that silent white flash. My copy was the Penguin Special paperback republished in 1958.⁸ I was young and passionate in my feelings about this, but I wasn't wrong, and as first-year university students during the Cuban crisis in 1962, my generation was not alone in thinking that our time had come. After all, the principle of mass extermination had come of age (in every terrible sense) in the conflict of 1939-1945, and the shadow that haunted my generation was the suddenly shadowless fate of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.
- 31 In fact the calculated fire-bombing of Tokyo, had already killed 100,000 people in a single night, which is more than were to perish under the atomic raids. Nevertheless the principle had been established and immediate immolation in the flash of a single device still retains a special horror. In 1965 a "Wednesday Play" for BBC TV was made by director Peter Watkins to show what would happen to Britain in the event of a nuclear attack. This mock documentary, *The War Game*, was so disturbing that the government

immediately banned it. Watkins's film achieved a limited release in art cinemas, but was not to be publicly broadcast for another 20 years. I was equally haunted by the holocaust, by the photographic record, and surely the sheer impossibility of it—no, the *actual* possibility of it. To confront the death camps was to encounter a terrible sense of shame, in the complicity of simply being human, of seeing what humans can do to each other. Such thoughts were part of our teenage years.

- 32 My own sense of the ambivalent and specially disturbing moral nature of the Second War (and the undeniable necessity of that war) came to crystallize around the aerial conflict, and especially the bombing campaign. I was struck by the extraordinary courage of the young aircrews, and their truly appalling losses; by the modernity and the technical glamour of the planes; by the inescapable ethical disgrace of area bombing. Randall Jarrell (who served in the US airforce) put it succinctly in a poem called "Losses":

We read our mail and counted up our missions.
In bombers named for girls, we burned
the cities we had learned about in school⁹

- 33 I became fascinated by the strangely mythic / mythmaking story of Major Claude Eatherly, the pilot of the weather plane that preceded both atomic bombings, who was supposed to have taken the collective responsibility for such an act onto his own shoulders, in a post-war life of self-harming and petty crime. English author John Wain wrote his sympathetic poem "A Song about Major Eatherly" in 1959, but William Bradford Huie's 1964 book *The Hiroshima Pilot*, debunked Eatherly's account as a self-serving fabrication.
- 34 The truth of this complex and muddled affair remains elusive. Nevertheless, the mythic resonance of the tale, and our desire to believe it, speaks of our need to seek poetic catharsis and to acknowledge some sort of moral accountability (even through the troubles of a single solitary, mendacious and disturbed man) at a time when everyone else seemed to be looking away. In a way much of what this essay has been exploring is a certain sense of belatedness that many of my generation may have experienced as we grew up in the years immediately after the global conflict of 1939-1945. This was the conflict, after all, that challenged understanding and expression alike, and led Theodor Adorno, to despair of poetry after Auschwitz.
- 35 It was in the process of thinking through what seemed to me to be the crucially and tragically distinctive nature of World War II, that I began to fully realize how some of the echoes and shadows from that conflict had come to the surface in my own creative writing.

True History on the Walls

- 36 My first large collection of poems was called *True History on the Walls*¹⁰ the second section of which was titled "to explain how it was" making specific reference to the conflict of 1939-45. The first poem of mine to be published in a poetry review (*Akros I, 1*) was inspired by the pomp and ceremony of the funeral of Winston Churchill on January 30th 1965. The event triggered a collectively sanitized, sentimentalized and triumphalist recollection of the war that made me uncomfortable at the time. (The part played by Churchill during the troubles in Ireland did not endear him to the Irish and their Scots sympathisers.) I think some of that ambiguous discomfort is evident in the lines of "Poem with Black Border".

POEM WITH BLACK BORDER

(W. S. Churchill d. 1965)

We were all there sand on the street
 rattle of boots its the soldiers son
 look its the soldiers here they come
 why are their rifles upside down?
 Heres the gun-carriage ah the gun-carriage
 look at the chains and the soldiers son
 I can see them now and remember it all.

Recollect Cigarette Cards

Some Air Raid Precautions

on the beaches quite a few
 never so many in the blitz
 see for miles by the fires
 and hear Jerry coming over

RUM HUM RUM HUM

British Butterflies

Friends then everybody decent
 help you out always cheery.
 Remember the days and the nights
 of our youth when we were alert
 and Jerry coming over RUM HUM

Plane Spotter's Guide

but Ethel and the Cartwrights went

RUM and the Browns HUM

and your Uncle Tom RUM HUM

Destroyers of the Fleet.

—saw curtains drawn in the afternoon
 few coupons left in the book
 evenings of radio and ruin
 fire and water danced in the streets
 holding hands and sirens on the rooftops
 piped us underground Hush.
 The taps froze that winter Hush.
 I remember. Margarine.

Sand for feet and soldiers with rifles
 sailors in squares marching and horses
 sabres and swords blanco and boots
 bombers flying and guns being towed.
 They're turning I cant help it
 they're carrying I cant help it
 I cant help it heres a tissue
 its sad Ive got to cry heres a hanky.
 Have my hanky. Take my handkerchief.
 Today Gathered together
 Gathered together today
 Gathered together today to mourn
 (Sand on the street rattle of boots)
 We were all there at the funeral
 we all in
 all in our finest
 all in our finest hour.

(I remember Holding hands the Cigarette Cards)



- 37 In fact Churchill's funeral was enacted once more on 30th January 2015. For this 50th anniversary the trip the coffin took down the Thames was recreated, producing, all over again exactly what had bothered me about the nationally self-regarding excess of the first occasion.
- 38 Here are extracts from David Cameron's speech on the day :
- "From the Battle of Omdurman to Britain's acquisition of the H bomb there stretched nearly 60 years and throughout it all he was right at the heart of events. [. . .] But if there is one aspect of this man I admire more than any other—it is Churchill the patriot. He knew Britain was not just a place on the map but a force in the world, with a destiny to shape events and a duty to stand up for freedom."¹¹
- 39 This may well be true. But the Battle of Omdurman and the invention of the H-bomb would not be my chosen examples of freedom and patriotism in action.¹²
- 40 There are many poems of personal expression and reminiscence in *True History on the Walls*, but the controlling metaphor of the collection has to do with the past returning, when family history and history at large cannot be escaped or denied. It imagines memory as a kind of marking, like the marks left on surfaces by long use, by wear and tear, scratches, and the passing of time. The nature of graffiti is to signal that someone, now gone, was once there long enough to make a record, in a kind of intimate damage that is both creative and destructive. This was the theme of the long title poem, with its epigraph "You cannot get away from what has gone before" (p. 26), which mixed images of joy and pain in the past with family, personal and historical references, from Homer to the building of the (then) new Forth Road Bridge. Many of the other poems in the collection did something similar, invoking Charlie Parker and the invasion of Poland during a present-day walk round Edinburgh Castle. Similar images from the war have popped up in later work, such as the radio echoes of bomber pilots shouting to each other in combat during the American daylight raids that feature in the poem "Wavelengths" from *Into the Blue Wavelengths*, (pp. 65-7).
- 41 The poem "11 O'Clock High" references the roof of a room in the *Eagle*, a pub I used to visit in Cambridge, much frequented during the war by flying crew on leave from fighter and bomber stations all around Suffolk. These young men, with heavy odds against them, left their own silly and poignant memorials when they scrawled their names and messages on the walls and the roof, often burned on by cigarette lighters or candle flames.

11 O'CLOCK HIGH

—Propellers on the walls
and I can read the past
above the bar where they drank
and left their names scrawled
on the ceiling with candles and matches
stacking tables to reach the plaster,
and the names the squadrons were called.

(Seniors of the public school
 with concrete floors and narrow beds
 dream of flying boots with knives concealed
 and the innocent silk
 map-of-Germany scarf.
 Ordinary life was never so real
 as vapour-trails chalked on the sky
 exclusive true-blue cruel.)
 More fragile than their planes in proof
 untried and alive I drink bitter only
 in the glare of the photographed dead.
 They came from Oxford in their youth
 certain of the truth
 killed the Hun and won a place
 at last for “Bonzo’s Pressure Boys”
 loud and lost in their fur-lined gear
 burned and burning on the roof.
 (37.)

- 42 In 1972 the *Daily Express* produced a sensational headline “Martin Bormann Discovered in South America” followed by a six-part series that included photographs of Bormann then and, reputedly, now. There had been much speculation over the years as to whether Hitler’s henchman had escaped from Europe to live as a businessman in Argentina, and here at last, apparently, were photographs to prove it.
- 43 Less convinced by this “likeness”, the affair led me to speculate on the difficulties of recognition and identity, compounded by questions of personal and collective responsibility, guilt, sacrifice and reparation. The comma inserted in the title of this poem changes the meaning of a direct question supposedly addressed to the reader, “Is this man Martin Bormann?”, into one addressed to Bormann himself—or the unfortunate person mistaken for him—as if they were being asked to explain, or indeed be answerable for, all the horrors that humankind is capable of: “Is this man, Martin Bormann?”
- 44 I didn’t know it at the time of writing, but after much fuss and excitement, “Martin Bormann” turned out to be an Argentinian school teacher, though I had cast him in an ambiguously humbler and more Christ-like role.

IS THIS MAN, MARTIN BORMANN?

In the country of Guatemala
 they talked to me of genocide
 I did not say much;
 living the way I have
 one becomes reserved,
 and what could I have said?

I was always good with my hands
 so I became a carpenter
 and carried the boards myself
 after the donkey died
 of old age, or the beatings,
 it hardly matters now.

“Why shouldn’t you
 die for the Jews?”

I could not think of a suitable reply
 and we are known by deeds
 not talk, they say:
 so they took my fingerprints away.

People argue in paper-shops
 “The hair-line is somewhat similar
 certainly he is older
 and of course much thinner
 but even changed in face and name
 isn't he still the same?”

But one becomes reserved,
 and soon it is too late
 to explain how it was
 for an odd job man
 who did not always use
 the very best materials.
 (35.)

- 45 The poem “The Director of the Museum” references Professor Shogo Nagaoka, who survived the bombing of Hiroshima and later became the Director of the Peace Memorial Museum there. A geologist by profession, even in the immediate aftermath of the attack, he made a unique study of the effects of the blast, charting the desolation and the terrible metamorphosis of stone and flesh all around him. He is said to have observed that, in the long run, such scientific study was more important than individual survival. His work, *Hiroshima Under Atomic Bomb Attack*,¹³ was published five years later as a little booklet with photographs and plans in both Japanese and English. Simultaneously magnificent and terrible, his single-minded dedication gave me the poem.

THE DIRECTOR OF THE MUSEUM

I was on holiday in August
 the University year was ended
 but on that particular afternoon
 when I walked into town
 I saw that everything was changed
 and it was time for me to find
 (as so many had to do)
 a technique for coming through.

So I numbered kerb-stones by the road
 and placed them in linen bags
 carefully labelled and stitched from flour sacks
 for use when I was a student
 of geology (it was years ago).
 I hardly thought I would need them again,
 Still I kept them and that is how
 I started my collection.

It seems the fireball in the air
 had spoiled the concrete slabs
 used for the street and metre by metre
 you can see its print on the face
 of the pavement—fused cracked or merely
 burned according to the distance from centre.

(I proved all this by later study
of my map and sample bags).

Curiosities came to light:
a mechanic's spanner and hand
welded to the engine it was mending;
and you will all have heard
of the ball in the air that never came down
(I cut its shadow from a wall).
But the tea-cup that looks like a flower
has grown dull on my shelves

and I hardly know it any more
for the jewel among the ashes
found on those concentric shores
where I moved in a mineralogist's dream;
until the time the cries died down
around me and dazed and awake I stood
in the suburbs and knew that I survived
(and the collection was complete).
(36-7.)

- 46 The poems “Black Forest” and “Welthistorische Perspektiven”¹⁴ referenced a dying soldier in Bavaria, and visions of Marlene Dietrich to generate a dream-like and dark beauty from creation, destruction and memory. These themes reappear strongly in the closing sequence “Fugue for Parker”, which mixes the creative breakthrough of jazz saxophonist Charlie Parker, and the beautiful complex music he created, with what was happening in Europe at the same time. Paul Klee’s painting “Death and Fire” was done in 1940, and the observation about pathos and distance comes from Antoine de St Exupéry who was a reconnaissance pilot in the French airforce during the battle for France in the same year —later recounted in his *Flight to Arras* (1942). The words of Parker himself are interweaved in the text with phrases from Hans Frank, a senior Nazi proponent of the “final solution” who was tried at Nuremberg; the housecleaning of Poland is a phrase from Hitler himself, while the reference to a symphony recollects the Jewish musicians who were ordered to play for their captors in the camps. “Parker’s Mood” is a searing slow blues.

FUGUE FOR PARKER

“It was December 1939. Now, I'd been getting bored with the stereotyped changes that were being used all the time at that time, and I kept thinking there's bound to be something else. I could hear it sometimes but I couldn't play it.

Well, that night I was working over *Cherokee*, and, as I did, I found that by using the higher intervals of a chord as a melody line and backing them with appropriately related changes, I could play the thing I'd been hearing. I came alive.”

—Charles Parker.

I

About the beautiful contrasts concerning
our walk to the Castle and the seasons of the wind
which ripple the stillness of puddles
and turn water round every cobble evenly

without exception. About the distances among us

—a continent between the turning of your head
and the movement of my hand in talk
of counterpoint —for a circus of reasons.

Yet few words for the real which is:
that will not stay to interpretation
but turns within us each alone
without exception unmarked by any historian

on the face of his event full maps.
And so few chronicles for Parker's inspiration
30 years ago with the foetor of eagles
in Europe a chill day and winter coming—

II

December 1939 saw snow in the streets
and shoes thin Warsaw down and lines of men
at the railway pulled out in slow trains
—to the factories *I kept thinking.*
Between bands Parker made New York at last
in December 1939 he jammed at Clark Monroe's
the Upton House all night —a fast way blowing
from Kansas City (hammed it on the clarinet then).
Brown bundles of greasy flannel were piled in the van
—a clothes collection bound with string
and then the rich and secret colours spilled
at the housecleaning of Poland.

("Gentlemen I must ask you to rid yourself
of all feeling of pity"). Bored
with the usual changes played in town
I kept thinking *there's bound to be something else.*

III

A painting of the period by Paul Klee
Death and Fire shows a child's effort at a skull
and a stick figure striding as drawn on a wall
with charcoal or chalk and not unfriendly looking.

"Pathos is the sense of distance" said the flyer
at 30,000 feet who saw compassion red
in hospital and nobility by the graves below
—"Death and fire inspire the best" he said.

And Parker took the habit again afraid of life
without its rest (heroin white compassion)
and although it was not given freely.
I could hear it sometimes but I couldn't play it.

IV

The cost: smoke is pillared above
the potato fields (frost bound and iron hard)
the fruits are black and shrunken uncollected
in the clay their rotting stems lie out of season

—and in the evening a symphony was performed
by the whole orchestra a first movement
of World History the inexorable purity of human values
towards a State in the likeness of the Lord.

He could hear it sometimes —a ghost alone
 in the head the intricate structure of fugue
 cut back to screaming pitch meaning without content
 intensity like light. Being he. Parker's mood.

V

And came together in December 1939 saying—
*I was working over "Cherokee" the housecleaning of Poland
 and found that by using the higher intervals of a chord
 the sense of distance as a melody line*

*and backing them the whole orchestra burned
 with appropriately related changes a symphony
 white heroin at screaming pitch greasy smoke
 drawn on a wall I could play
 the thing I'd been hearing rich and secret colours
 alone without content
 being he and intricate
 I came alive.*

We sheltered beside the antique cannon
 with your hair around us like a flag
 watched the litter fly like birds opened our mouths
 and heard our heads roar in the passing air.
 "... but all that is over" you said.
 (42-4.)

- 47 This poem closed the section on "to explain how it was" and summarises much of what I have been exploring in this essay, with the horror and the fascination of these old echoes coming through to a later and younger generation, like some fading radio transmission from a past that thrills, horrifies and fascinates, and will not go away.

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NOTES

1. Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser seized control of the Suez Canal in 1956 and nationalised it, precipitating an invasion by Israeli, French and British forces that caused international condemnation and, without American support, a serious loss of face for Britain.
2. “*The Wooden Horse, Angels One Five, The Cruel Sea, The Colditz Story, Above Us the Waves, The Dam Busters, The Battle of the River Plate, Reach for the Sky, Ill Met By Moonlight, Carve Her Name With Pride, Dunkirk and Sink the Bismarck!* were among the leading films at the British box office between 1950 and 1960.” (Chapman, 97.)
3. See also Michael Paris, *Warrior Nation: Images of War in British Popular Culture, 1850-2000*. London: Reaktion Books, 2002.
4. The same premise was particularly influential in later Hollywood films such as *The Dirty Dozen; The Great Escape; Kelly's Heroes; Inglorious Basterds*.
5. Flodden was the site of a catastrophic Scottish defeat in fighting the English on behalf of France and “the Auld Alliance” in 1513.
6. In comedy: “Dad’s Army” (9 years and endless repeats), “It Ain’t Half Hot Mum” (7 years), and “Allo ’Allo!” (10 years), In drama: “Colditz” (2 years), “Tenko” (3 years), “Home Fires” (2 years) and “Foyle’s War” (13 years).
7. *From the Line: Scottish War Poetry 1914-1945*, ed. and introduced by David Goldie and Roderick Watson, Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2014.
8. First published in an entire issue of the *New Yorker* in 1946.
9. Randall Jarrell, ‘Losses’ (1948) in *Complete Poems*, London: Faber & Faber, 1971.
10. Roderick Watson, *True History on the Walls*, Edinburgh: Macdonald, 1976.
11. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/winston-churchill-memorial-event-pm-speech>
12. Omdurman saw Kitchener defeat the forces of the Mahdi in the Sudan, by killing 10,000 men with water-cooled Maxim machine guns. British casualties were 47 dead. Winston Churchill, said the Mahdi’s forces looked like a “twelfth-century Crusader army” equipped with spears, swords, and banners embroidered with Koranic texts.
13. Shogo Nagaoka, *Hiroshima under atomic bomb attack*, Hiroshima: A-Bomb Memorial Hall, 1951.
14. “World-historical Perspectives” is the title of the second volume of Oswald Spengler’s *Decline of the West* (1923).

ABSTRACTS

Academic and poet Roderick Watson reflects on memories of war and the popular culture of war that influenced his younger years only to reappear in the imagery of his later creative work. A critical reflection is offered on popular representations of the Second World War, and how these have become a foundational myth of modern British identity. Attention is paid to his first major collection *True History on the Walls* (1976) and the poems that make explicit reference to the conflict of 1939-45.

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Quoted persons: Theodor Adorno, Martin Bormann, Angus Calder, David Cameron, James Chapman, Winston Churchill, Marlene Dietrich, Giulio Douhet, Claude Eatherly, Hans Frank, David Goldie, Alfred Harmsworth, John Hersey, Randall Jarrell, Earl Kitchener, Paul Klee, Valerie Kripps, Cecil Day Lewis, Eric Linklater, Catriona Macdonald, Shogo Nagaoka, Gamal Abdel Nasser, Christopher Nolan, Pierre Nora, Michael Paris, Charlie Parker, Antoine de St Exupéry, Oswald Spengler, D. C. Thomson, John Wain

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