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D. C. Gill. How We Are Changed By War: A Study of Letters and Diaries from Colonial Conflicts to Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Joseph Michael Gratale



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REFERENCES

Routledge. 2010. Pp. 294. ISBN-13: 978-0415873116.

- 1 Writing in the early 1800s, the Prussian military theorist Carl Von Clausewitz, articulated the often quoted dictum which essentially suggests that war is the continuation of politics by other means. Clausewitz's realist approach to politics, and war, by extension, has continued to have relevance up through to the present, even surviving Michel Foucault's inversion of the phrase as well as the changing nature and dynamics of war in the postmodern age. Such reflections represent a particular approach to the study of war which intimately involves the role of nation-states, institutions, political actors, geopolitics, as well as other elements linked to issues of power. The study of war through the lens of power politics remains popular, perhaps justifiably so. Equally worthy as an approach, however, to the study of war is what one will find in D. C. Gill's volume titled, *How We Are Changed By War: A Study of Letters and Diaries from Colonial Conflicts to Operation Iraqi Freedom*. While the study of this genre is not novel, Gill's exploration is more of a nuanced handling of the subject matter.
- 2 *How We Are Changed By War* includes an introduction and seven chapters which focus on particular themes connected to letters and diaries written during war-time. Perhaps a more apt way of describing these chapters is that they are *explorations* into the world of war as articulated by those who have experienced it first-hand, either on the front-line or

at the home front. Specifically, this volume only makes use of correspondences, letters, and diaries from the American military context, taking the reader through America's wars from the colonial period of the 18th century all the way through to the war in Iraq during the early twenty-first century. It is, therefore, strictly the experiences, representations, and reflections of American soldiers and civilians of the harsh realities of war. While Gill's approach in this respect might seem limiting to some it is offset by the rather wide diachronic framework she is working in. In using the USA, the author is able, on one hand, to draw from a wide range of war-time experiences, while simultaneously *capturing* these experiences at different phases of American national development. In this regard, Gill's work is not just a study of war-time reflections, but also a study of citizens' responses to the constantly shifting mentalities and, some might argue, psychoses of the nation. Supporting Gill's delve into this array of topics centered on war letters, is a very well developed bibliography covering a range of fields and theoretical perspectives. From philosophy, psychology, and sociology to literature, postmodern analysis, and literary criticism, Gill's methodological approach has enormous breadth which in the end proves to enrich the content of her study in an impressive manner.

- 3 For most individuals, reading about war can be a traumatic undertaking. Reading letters from soldiers experiencing war firsthand can be downright unnerving and at times disturbing. As I began reading Gill's book, my calmness was suddenly shaken and undermined by the first excerpt from a letter written during World War II. It reads: "I sometimes reflect with amazement on my role in this war. I used to be...a pacifist—talked about the infinite value of the human personality...But here I am [at the front lines]...Do you wonder that I say I'm sometimes amazed at myself? I am more of a pacifist than I ever was, but as long as there are vermin like Japs and Nazis, they have to be exterminated—and it is hellish work." With all the excerpts in the volume, Gill not only places them in an historical context, but she also provides an analysis, or explanation of these war-time expressions through the lens of a particular disciplinary approach, such as that of psychology. It is not simply a collection of entries, excerpts, and quotes about the experience of war, but rather a running narrative of complexity and depth. While the genre of war-time letter/diaries is not a new one, Gill's presentation and framing of it is unique. The excerpt given above could be approached from a number of different perspectives. How does war change one's identity? What are the specific transformational qualities of the war experience on the self? What becomes of the soldier after the war? How does one who has been traumatized by war return to society? Or, those at the home-front, what challenges do they face? Consider the following excerpt from a wife to her soldier husband during World War II: "Your being a hero as long as the war was on was all right with me but now I wish you would bend every effort to come home. The victrola won't work, the baby is coming, [and] the kitchen light is on the blink." The incredibly mundane nature of this excerpt reminds readers that other things are 'at play' for civilians at the home-front besides fear of loss, or longing for a loved one.
- 4 Most readers I believe will appreciate the varied range of selections and nuanced styles of expression and representation of war that emerge from the impressive collection the author has culled and assembled into an integrated whole. Some, however, may find Gill's explication of excerpts to be tiresome and at times belaboring. Or perhaps the theoretical explorations in the realms of the self and identity might strain readers who are simply looking for the smells, tastes, and sensations of war as experienced by those

soldiers who encountered it first-hand. But as she suggests in her introduction, *How We Are Changed By War* “focuses on war’s transformation of an individual’s sense of himself or herself. It is the evolution of one’s identity that often provides people with the most telling souvenir of war.” My impressions tend to see Gill’s approach to war letters/diaries as utterly refreshing and insightful. Admittedly, it is a narrative that is elaborate and complex, but then again, the nature of war is quite consistent with those qualities. Gill’s handling of this genre results in a reorientation of how one might approach both the soldier/civilian subjects in the context of war, and the societal impacts which result. For this reason and more, she deserves a great deal of credit. A soldier writing during World War I had the following to say to his newly employed girlfriend: “Don’t change too much or even as much as I have changed from the fellow you used to know.” Perhaps Clausewitz and Foucault are both right after all: war as a continuation of politics, or politics as a continuation of war. In the end it is a struggle either way.

AUTHOR

JOSEPH MICHAEL GRATALE

The American College of Thessaloniki-Greece