



**F. Houghton, *The Veterans' Tale: British Military Memoirs of the Second World War* (Cambridge, 2018).**

*Source: Midlands Historical Review, Book Review*

**Published: 26/07/2021**

**URL:**

**<http://www.midlandshistoricalreview.com/f-houghton-the-veterans-tale-british-military-memoirs-of-the-second-world-war/>**

**Book Review: F. Houghton, *The Veterans' Tale: British Military Memoirs of the Second World War* (Cambridge, 2018).**

William Noble

**Biography**

William Noble is a PhD student at the University of Nottingham, funded by Midlands4Cities. His research examines the relationships between popular discourses of 'race' and immigration, and the concept of 'decline' in the post-war Midlands.

What can veterans' memoirs of the Second World War tell us about combatants' experiences both of conflict and post-war life? This is the question that Frances Houghton seeks to answer in *The Veterans' Tale: British Military Memoirs of the Second World War*. In response, Houghton convincingly demonstrates that veterans' memoirs are valuable to historians because of their capacity to reveal the ex-combatants' retrospective memory and understanding of battle; despite which they have been previously unheard on a collective level within the scholarship on war, memory, and personal narratives.<sup>1</sup> Houghton argues the attention they have received has been in the discipline of literary criticism, for example in Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* and Samuel Hynes' *The Soldiers' Tale*.<sup>2</sup> Given the voluminous literature on the war's impact on British society, politics and culture – which has taken account of war films, public memorials and commemorations, and many other types of sources besides – in writing the first book-length historical study of Second World War veterans' memoirs Houghton is beginning to correct this surprising omission.<sup>3</sup>

Drawing influence from various disciplines, including memory studies, auto/biographical studies, and histories of the emotions, Houghton investigates how veterans reinterpreted their wartime experiences in the post-war years, by examining their relationships to four main themes: landscape; weaponry; the enemy; and comradeship. Houghton's detailed introduction establishes the book's theoretical and methodological underpinnings.<sup>4</sup> In Alessandro Portelli's famous defence of oral history, he wrote that the value of oral testimony lies not in its 'adherence to fact', but in 'its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, and desire emerge'.<sup>5</sup> Houghton views veterans' memoirs similarly, arguing that the embellishments, discrepancies, and conflicts in an individual's memories are what

---

<sup>1</sup> F. Houghton, *The Veterans' Tale: British Military Memoirs of the Second World War* (Cambridge, 2018), pp. 4-5.

<sup>2</sup> P. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London, 1975); S. Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (London, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> See, for one example among many, M. Connelly, *We Can Take It! Britain and the Memory of the Second World War* (Harlow, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Houghton, *The Veterans' Tale*, pp. 4-6.

<sup>5</sup> A. Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History Different', in R. Perks and A. Thomson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader* (London, 1998), pp. 68-9.

make them such a rich source of evidence both about how war was experienced at the time, and how it is remembered over the subsequent years and decades.<sup>6</sup> In the following eight chapters, which can be roughly divided into three sections, Houghton surveys a wide range of veteran memoirs from the Army, Navy, and RAF, and from the European, North African and Atlantic theatres – comparing and contrasting the experiences of combatants in each.

Chapters 1 and 2 (the first section) survey the provenance of Second World War veteran memoirs, employing the archives of major publishing houses to examine veterans' motives for, and the process of writing, publishing and publicly producing their war experiences in book form in post-war Britain. In Chapter 1, 'Motive and the Veteran-Memoirist', Houghton demonstrates how, for some veterans, factors such as post-traumatic stress disorders, post-war disillusionment, and an inability to build lasting relationships saw the war elevated to an 'apex of memory'.

Constructing memoirs could enable veterans to process their combat experiences to be able to better cope with the present. These discussions of veterans' post-war struggles are rather brief, however, and could form the basis for a fascinating study in its own right, though Houghton's introduction makes it clear that her focus is specifically on combat experiences.<sup>7</sup> However, memoirs were not only constructed for an 'Audience of the Self'.<sup>8</sup> Memoirists also wrote for 'Audiences of the Future' – for their children, for future generations of servicemen, and/or as a general warning to the public to 'not let it happen again'.<sup>9</sup> Finally, they wrote for 'Audiences of Comrades', both living and dead.<sup>10</sup>

Chapter 2 examines the process of 'Penning and Publishing the Veterans' Tale', with prominent themes including: memoirists' insistence on the reliability of their memories, despite which many went to great efforts to establish the veracity of their accounts with support from a variety of additional sources (letters, diaries, regimental records, etc.); disputes between authors and publishers, as veterans'

---

<sup>6</sup> Houghton, *The Veterans' Tale*, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Houghton, *The Veterans' Tale*, pp. 22-6.

<sup>8</sup> Houghton, *The Veterans' Tale*, pp. 29-39.

<sup>9</sup> Houghton, *The Veterans' Tale*, pp. 40-45.

<sup>10</sup> Houghton, *The Veterans' Tale*, pp. 46-52.

desires for the most authentic representation of their war experiences could clash with the publishers' commercial incentives; and the trend for memoirists to become more candid in their accounts as censorship was eased (both of information with the 1967 amendment of the Public Records Act, and of language with the reforms of the Obscene Publications Act), and as a more 'liberal climate' developed from the 1960s.<sup>11</sup>

Chapters 3-6 (the second section analyse the 'narrative content' of the memoirs, and particularly their literary representations of the front line, focusing respectively on the themes of landscape, weaponry, the enemy, and comradeship.<sup>12</sup> Chapter 3, 'Landscape, Nature, and Battlefields', investigates the landscape's role in shaping experiences of combat, and the meanings veterans projected onto these landscapes, through comparison and contrast of their experiences with the Army in North Africa, in aerial combat, and at sea.<sup>13</sup> In all cases, Houghton finds that landscapes were invested with distinct symbolism which allowed veterans to make sense of their battle spaces.<sup>14</sup> Chapter 4 similar examines veterans' relationships with weaponry, examining the Royal Navy in the Battle of the Atlantic, Battle of Britain fighter pilots, and tank crews in the 1944 Normandy Campaign, again comparing and contrasting these varied experiences.<sup>15</sup> For example, while the differences between the latter two are particularly striking, these accounts all reinforced the centrality of the human experience of war, rather than the story that has sometimes been told of the Second World War of machines 'dominating' to the 'exclusion of the human combatant'.<sup>16</sup>

Chapter 5, "'Distance", Killing, and the Enemy', similarly complicates accounts of warfare which suggest that technology depersonalised killing. Houghton finds that technology could not make the dead completely anonymous, though Navy and RAF veteran-memoirists were perhaps better able to employ the 'grey machinery of

---

<sup>11</sup> Houghton, *The Veterans' Tale*, pp. 59-65.

<sup>12</sup> Houghton, *The Veterans' Tale*, pp. 25-6.

<sup>13</sup> Houghton, *The Veterans' Tale*, pp. 72-82, 83-92, and 93-101 respectively.

<sup>14</sup> Houghton, *The Veterans' Tale*, pp. 101-2.

<sup>15</sup> Houghton, *The Veterans' Tale*, pp. 105-12, 112-21, and 121-35 respectively.

<sup>16</sup> Houghton, *The Veterans' Tale*, pp. 135-6.

murder' as a psychological barrier to avoid confronting any moral qualms over their actions than those who served in the Army.<sup>17</sup> Some of the most poignant sections of the book are those in this chapter which deal with veterans' contacts with the enemy; their memoirs suggest that preconceived ideas of German troops as the inhuman 'Hun' could not be sustained after their first personal contact with them.<sup>18</sup> It would be interesting to contrast these veterans' experiences with those who fought against Japan, but Houghton chooses not to consult memoirs by those who fought in Asia, as the deeply racialised conceptions of the Japanese held by the British render veterans' depictions of combat on that front very different to those who fought in Europe.<sup>19</sup> Chapter 6, 'Comradeship, Leadership, and Martial Fraternity', investigates the claim by psychiatrists and others that the 'small group in combat' was the main motivation for fighting and was key to preventing psychological breakdown during combat.<sup>20</sup> Houghton finds that for memoirists, the personal relationships within their small group were indeed the 'ultimate spur' in battle, whether this small group was a platoon, the company of a 'little ship' or submarine, or a seven-man Lancaster bomber crew, though again there were also important differences between the various branches.<sup>21</sup>

Chapters 7 and 8 (the third section) explore how memoirists used their historical records for both private and public reasons, using their memoirs both for self-fashioning and for claiming agency over their wartime experiences.<sup>22</sup> Chapter 7, 'Selfhood and Coming of Age', charts how memoirists wrote of their wartime experience as a journey from 'Youthful Innocence' to 'Manhood'. Houghton compares these memoirs to *Bildungsroman*, interrogating how veteran-memoirists understood and reconstructed their ideas of masculinity, maturity, and selfhood in relation to their war experiences.<sup>23</sup> The chapter investigates memoirists' motivations for joining the conflict, finding that despite being aware of the horrors of the First

---

<sup>17</sup> J. Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare* (London, 1999), p. 6.

<sup>18</sup> Houghton, *The Veterans' Tale*, pp. 161, 166-7.

<sup>19</sup> Houghton, *The Veterans' Tale*, p. 22.

<sup>20</sup> Simon Wessely, 'Twentieth-Century Theories on Combat Motivation and Breakdown', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 41/2 (2006), p. 269.

<sup>21</sup> Houghton, *The Veterans' Tale*, p. 170.

<sup>22</sup> Houghton, *The Veterans' Tale*, pp. 25-6.

<sup>23</sup> Houghton, *The Veterans' Tale*, p. 207.

World War many memoirists, influenced by the popular culture of the period, saw warfare as an enticing ‘adventure’ situation, and the soldier as a ‘quintessential figure of heroic masculinity’.<sup>24</sup> However, the chapter also shows that memoirists were quickly disabused of these naïve beliefs.<sup>25</sup> Memoirists still saw the war as crucial to their ‘growing up’, but the model of adult masculinity they ascribed to was less the ‘soldier-hero’ model identified by Graham Dawson, but instead the ‘understated, good-humoured, kindly, and self-deprecating courage of the “little man”’ identified by Sonya Rose.<sup>26</sup> Crucially, this latter model of masculinity, unlike the ‘soldier-hero’ model, could include civilians on the home front, offering reassurance that veterans would be able to readapt to a civilian masculinity.<sup>27</sup> Whilst Houghton in her introduction acknowledges the impossibility of ignoring women’s impact on masculine identities and experiences—even in such seemingly closed-off, all-male institutions as the British military—she nonetheless does not investigate how women were represented in veterans’ memoirs, as *The Veterans’ Tale* is essentially concerned with memoirists’ representations of frontline combat, from which women were excluded.<sup>28</sup>

While all eight chapters are fascinating, it is in Chapter 8, ‘History, Cultural Memory, and the Veteran-Memoirist’, that the wider importance of military memoirs to the historical and cultural memory of the war becomes clear. Here, Houghton examines how three memoirists – Alex Bowlby, Miles Tripp, and Jack Broome – used their memoirs to challenge what were in their opinion unsatisfactory official, academic, and cultural representations of the war. For example, Miles Tripp’s 1969 memoir of his service as a bomb-aimer, *The Eighth Passenger*, was intended to rehabilitate RAF Bomber Command’s post-war reputation, which many former aircrew felt presented them as war criminals.<sup>29</sup> However, it was also used by historians in

---

<sup>24</sup> Houghton, *The Veterans’ Tale*, pp. 208-21.

<sup>25</sup> Houghton, *The Veterans’ Tale*, pp. 221-42.

<sup>26</sup> G. Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire, and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London, 1994); S. O. Rose, ‘Temperate Heroes: Concepts of Masculinity in Second World War Britain’, in Stefan Dudink, Karen Hagemann and John Tosh (eds.), *Masculinities in Politics and War: Gendering Modern History* (Manchester, 2004), pp. 177-95.

<sup>27</sup> Houghton, *The Veterans’ Tale*, pp. 242-3.

<sup>28</sup> Houghton, *The Veterans’ Tale*, pp. 22-3.

<sup>29</sup> The Lancaster bombers which Tripp served in had a seven-man crew; the ‘eighth passenger’ is an allusion to fear, specifically the way Tripp saw it as invariably accompanying the bomber crews on every mission.

debates on the morality of Bomber Command's actions, particularly the February 1945 Dresden raid, with Tripp's claim that he attempted to drop his bombs outside the city interpreted by many as an implicit attack on Bomber Command. The chapter examines Tripp's vehement denials of such claims, and his opposition to his memoir being used by disgraced historian David Irving (most notorious as a Holocaust denier) to support his account of the raid, which was later discredited as he vastly inflated the number of deaths by over 100,000 as part of his attempt to castigate the RAF and establish a moral equivalence between the Nazi regime's crimes, and the killing of German civilians.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, the short conclusion summarises the book's main themes, namely memoirists' desires to depict their personal reactions to war, and the human factors comprising the experience of battle, in contrast to military historians' more grand and dehumanised narratives. As Houghton puts it, war memoirs 'capture the man inside the uniform, his own understanding of his physical and psychological performance in the field, and his emotional responses' to combat. Significantly, they offer a window into the 'experience of battle as it endures in a veteran's mind throughout his lifetime'. Memoirists wrote for public audiences, to educate, entertain, and warn them of the folly of war, and in an attempt to claim ownership of scholarly, official, and cultural remembrance of the conflict, but they also wrote for themselves, to 'reconstruct shattered notions of masculine self into a coherent and meaningful image' in the post-war years.<sup>31</sup>

This is an impressive and important book, but there are some small points of criticism that can be made in addition to those already raised. Houghton chooses to follow a thematic structure in her chapters, in turn dividing each chapter into an examination of the distinct experiences of combatants in each branch of the armed forces. This can make it somewhat difficult to trace the experiences of any particular memoirist, or of any branch of the armed forces, though the index is helpful in this regard. Moreover, while Houghton is up-front about why some memoirs were

---

<sup>30</sup> Houghton, *The Veterans' Tale*, pp. 254-62.

<sup>31</sup> Houghton, *The Veterans' Tale*, pp. 272-8.

excluded from the scope of her study, the exclusion of accounts written during the war itself is perhaps unfortunate, as to contrast accounts written then with those written in the post-war years and decades might have helped elucidate her arguments about memoirists' changing perspectives over time.<sup>32</sup>

No one study cannot be expected to cover all aspects of this vast and fascinating subject, however, and it is clear that an enormous amount of research went into this book. Houghton's bibliography lists over ninety individual memoirists, some with multiple titles and/or editions to their name, such that the total number of memoirs consulted is over a hundred.<sup>33</sup> This is in addition to a huge range of other primary and secondary sources, and every point made is well substantiated with multiple examples from veterans' memoirs. *The Veterans' Tale* is successful in substantiating its central claim for the importance of veterans' memoirs as historical sources, and in providing fresh insights into veterans' experiences of combat as they were lived and remembered throughout veterans' lifetimes.<sup>34</sup> It is now left for other historians to build on Houghton's work in furthering our understanding of British cultural memories of the Second World War. More thorough examination of the post-war lives of 'veteran-memoirists', and studies of those types of memoirs Houghton excludes from her account, would be particularly fascinating.

---

<sup>32</sup> Houghton, *The Veterans' Tale*, pp. 22-5.

<sup>33</sup> Houghton, *The Veterans' Tale*, pp. 279-90.

<sup>34</sup> Houghton, *The Veterans' Tale*, p. 2.

## Bibliography

- Bourke, J., *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare* (London, 1999).
- Connelly, M., *We Can Take It! Britain and the Memory of the Second World War* (Harlow, 2004).
- Dawson, G., *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire, and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London, 1994).
- Fussell, P., *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London, 1975).
- Houghton, F., *The Veterans' Tale: British Military Memoirs of the Second World War* (Cambridge, 2018).
- Hynes, S., *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (London, 1998).
- Portelli, A., 'What Makes Oral History Different', in R. Perks and A. Thomson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader* (London, 1998), pp. 63-74.
- Rose, S. O., 'Temperate Heroes: Concepts of Masculinity in Second World War Britain', in S. Dudink, K. Hagemann and J. Tosh (eds.), *Masculinities in Politics and War: Gendering Modern History* (Manchester, 2004), pp. 177-95.
- Wessely, S., 'Twentieth-Century Theories on Combat Motivation and Breakdown', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 41/2 (2006), pp. 269-86.