Artistic Responses to the First World War

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Artistic Responses to the First World War

The Edinburgh Companion to the First World War and the Arts is a valuable reference work that moves outside the bounds of traditional surveys of war literature and culture. Contributions reflect new approaches to canonical and non-canonical authors and artists. As the editors Ann-Marie Einhaus and Katherine Isobel Baxter note in their introduction to the volume: ‘The underlying critical assumption of this volume is that literary and artistic responses to the war are often, if not always, closely linked with the war’s evolving memory and its perception in the popular imagination’ (4). The term ‘arts’ is construed broadly, ‘including any area of cultural production, from fine art to literature, performance, film and broadcasting, and curatorial and publishing practice’ (1). Chapters consider not only immediate responses to the First World War, but also musicians, artists and writers today who address war themes and subjects. Occasioned by the centenary commemorations of the First World War, the collection offers a broad survey of First World War remembrance.

The 26 chapters in this collection are divided across 6 sections, covering literature, visual arts, music, periodicals and journalism, film and broadcasting, and publishing and material culture. Many of the chapters are illustrated in black and white; the centre of the book contains 10 colour plates of artwork and posters. Bibliographic material accompanies each chapter, and a full index is provided at the back of the book.

The essays in the book primarily focus on British experience, although some chapters explore French, Italian, Turkish and German perspectives. For example, Laura Wittman’s chapter, ‘Memorials: Embodiment and Unconventional Mourning’, concentrates on French and Italian works of memory. Joy Laycock turns to the Ottoman/Russian front in a chapter about First World War reporting. Ann-Marie Einhaus’s study of the short story includes a consideration of American literature.
The varied approaches to the topics in *The Edinburgh Companion* suggest patterns of interpretation that can be built on with future research. Some authors chose to focus on close readings of one or two examples, such as Kate Kennedy’s fine reading of musical works by Ivor Gurney and Benjamin Britten. Other writers are comprehensive. Kate MacDonald’s thorough and informative ‘Popular Periodicals: Wartime Newspapers, Magazines and Journals’ is one of the latter. In addition to addressing periodical publication, circulation and readership, she considers how fictional characters encounter periodicals.

A number of chapters provide a welcome departure from canonical forms. Chris Kempshall’s insightful chapter on First World War-themed computer games makes a plea for scholars and teachers to become more engaged with gaming. Game developers are interested in producing work that is ‘factually and historically sound’, and Kempshall envisages a role for historians that augments the developers’ use of ‘historical websites, Osprey military books and re-enactment literature as popular sources’ (428). Furthermore, games reach a wide and diverse audience, much wider than the reach of specialized academic and military book titles or documentaries, and, given their potential to immerse users in the active world of decision-making, can enhance students’ study of the war.

Robert Dean’s chapter, ‘Music Hall and Recruitment’, is notable for its methodology. Offering an extended case study of a popular song, ‘Your King and Country Want You’ (1914, commissioned by the *Daily Mail*), Dean includes an extensive section on performance history and eyewitness reception. His close reading of the lyrics and the staging of music hall acts follows the song into its afterlife in the film *Regeneration* (1997). Focusing on actual patrons and their reactions to the song, rather than constructed or assumed audiences, Dean’s contribution is essential reading for scholars in musicology, theatre and reception studies.

Similarly, the methodology of James Thompson’s ‘Posters and Advertising’ is significant for pointing out that the First World War was not necessarily a rupture, but a continuation of the visual vocabulary used in the January 1910 general election and ‘the propaganda machinery…of the South African War of 1899–1902’ (168). The First World War has typically been envisioned as an instigator of design practices, altering the advertising styles of the 1920s; Thompson, on the other hand, persuades readers that there is much to be gained from looking backwards at earlier models.

Because no anthology can claim to be comprehensive, *The Edinburgh Companion* offers readers opportunities to complement the chapters with new material. For example, Andrew Maunder’s chapter on theatre brings theatrical productions up through to *War Horse*, which premiered in 2007 and remains in production at the time of this review. New research
can be conducted on several recent productions as well, such as Ian Hislop and Nick Newman’s *The Wipers Times* (2017); Neil McPherson’s *It’s Easy to Be Dead* (2016), based on the writing of Charles Hamilton Sorley and featuring contemporary music by composers such as Ivor Gurney, George Butterworth and Ralph Vaughan Williams; the Welsh National Opera production of a new opera by Iain Bell, *In Parenthesis* (2016), based on the work of David Jones; and Mesh Theatre’s *in situ* revival of R. C. Sherriff’s *Journey’s End* (1928) in a nineteenth-century munitions dump in Ypres, Belgium.

For a book which is a reference work as well as a collection of essays, solid bibliographies are essential. For this work, in particular, the bibliographies emerge as worthwhile reading in themselves, because they not only reference the works in the chapters, but for the most part also provide a broad study of the scholarship to date. Alice Kelly’s chapter on wartime correspondence is exemplary in this respect. Her meticulous and lucid chapter ranges from discussions of literacy and censorship, through the Post Office’s arrangements for the delivery of letters, to the advertising for pens on the home front. An outstanding lengthy bibliography includes French and German sources for further research.

Any weaknesses in the collection are tendencies to default to traditional points of view. Matthew Potter’s chapter on painting ‘in the wake of the First World War’ addresses spirituality in paintings, using the painters Stanley Spencer and Will Longstaff as examples. A very fine closing section of the chapter brings the artistic response forward to contemporary artists working with First World War themes. Potter’s exceptional bibliography contains many useful and recent works on modernism, the war and art, including a fine section on images of the war at sea. Unfortunately, however, the chapter does not address paintings by women such as the English painters Olive Mudie-Cooke, Norah Neilson-Gray or Clare Atwood (to name but a few); many women painted the home front, suggesting another lens for studying the artistic response to the war.

Laura Brandon’s chapter on sculpture is disappointing for its focus on traditional male figures such as Jacob Epstein, rather than seizing the opportunity to explore the work of female artists such as Ella Bergmann-Michel, Emy Roeder and the celebrated Dadaist Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. The bibliography does not reference recent scholarship and focuses instead on the media and dimensions of the works mentioned in the chapter. One has to take issue, as well, with her uncritical use of the word ‘primitive’ to describe non-western art, especially in the context of how indigenous works were appropriated by the celebrated male artists of the avant-garde.
In general, given Kempshall’s notable contribution on visuality and narrative in computer games, the writers on art could have done more with illustration, other than that used for posters. The recently discovered sketches of E. H. Shepard, now published as *Shepard’s War: E. H. Shepard, the Man Who Drew Winnie-the-Pooh* (2015), and the History Press publication *A Tommy’s Sketchbook: Diary and Drawings from the Trenches* (2012), by Henry Buckle, would make a good start. An extraordinary body of comics can be traced from the war to the present, including Bud Fisher’s *Mutt and Jeff in the Trenches* (1912), Joe Sacco’s *The Great War* (2013) and *The Harlem Hellfighters* (2014), by Max Brooks.


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