

## War's Harsh Realities

reviewed by Dr. Williamson Murray

**THE MIDDLE PARTS OF FORTUNE.** By Frederic Manning.  
Buchan & Enright, London, 1988. Out of print.



First published in 1929 in a limited edition, *The Middle Parts of Fortune* proved too harsh in its language for an age of intellectuals busy worshipping Stalin's Soviet Union; it reappeared shortly thereafter in expurgated form as *Her Privates We*—an edition that enjoyed modest success as one of the more important pieces of literature to appear about the First World War. It was not until 1977 that a new edition of the original was published, this time with a brief, eloquent forward by Sir Michael Howard.

There is, of course, a great literature on World War I. Unfortunately, that literature has all too often been represented by *All Quiet on the Western Front*, a novel considerably inferior to the great film made about it in the early 1930s. Unlike the film, the novel's characters possess a woodenness, its actions a triteness, and its literary qualities a superficiality that reflected the general lack of talent of the author, as well as his relatively short ex-

perience in the conflict's long years of horror. Its popularity undoubtedly owes much to the tastes of those who preached pacifism in the face of Adolf Hitler and who remained oblivious to the harsh realities of peace in the 20th century: "If you desire peace, prepare for war."

*The Middle Parts of Fortune*, however, has enjoyed little success—perhaps because it is too harsh, too realistic for most. Its soldiers are real men who talk like frontline troops, their language dosed with the words that the standards of late 20th century usage has rendered so common as to no longer attract attention. Yet no other novel or book about soldiers—with

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the possible exception of Michael Herr's *Dispatches*—has better captured the way that soldiers talk. It is perhaps that level of realism, its description of men at war and their dark, forbidding surroundings, that makes *The Middle Parts of Fortune* truly, in Sir Howard's words, "one of the greatest books about soldiers in the whole of western literature." As he suggests, Manning has written a book:

... about soldiering rather than fighting—about the scrounging, drilling, yarning, gossiping, gambling, drinking and womanizing which has always constituted the great bulk of military experience . . . It is about the patient creation or re-creation of relationships after one catastrophe, and their destruction in another.

The author himself tells us in his prefatory note that:

[I]n recording the conversations of the men I seemed at times to hear the voices of ghosts. Their judgments were necessarily partial and prejudiced; but prejudices and partialities provide most of the driving power of life. . . . I have drawn no portraits; and my concern has been mainly with the anonymous ranks, whose opinion, often mere surmise and ill-informed, but real and true for them, I have tried to represent faithfully.

Indeed, he has.

We first meet the nameless unit after its return from heavy fighting on the Somme in fall 1916, where it has fought in one of those innumerable battles that swelled the casualties lists in Haig's endless effort to break the German Army—efforts that would not succeed for another 2 years and only after hundreds of thousands were killed and maimed (both in body and in mind). The survivors of this battle are dirty, hungry, and physically exhausted. The author maintains his distance; he does not tell of his suffering as do so many of the novels and remembrances of the war. Rather, we too are observers, slowly but steadily drawn into the lives and spirits of a "fine mob," as one of the soldiers simply puts it.

As an observer, just as those new to the unit, the reader is allowed to draw

his or her own conclusions, and often those conclusions prove unfounded, because, as in the real world, we do not yet know enough to make fair judgments. "Weeper," a man whose nickname indicates his constant, unending complaining, which has earned him the contempt of his mates so that none will even bunk with him, earns our contempt as well—we too have known those who simply cannot or will not shut up and who thereby make the misery of all that much the worse. And yet, at the terrible moment when Bourne, the hero, is selected for a last minute patrol before leaving for officer candidates school, Weeper alone stands up and volunteers to fight with his comrade. "If tha go'st, a'm goin'," he announces to Bourne before a startled officer. And when Bourne falls, insisting, "Go on, I'm scuppered," Weeper replies, "a'll not leave thee," and brings his comrade's body back. We have misjudged him until the very end of the novel, just as have his comrades.

There is in Manning a depiction of the dark hopelessness of fate, as well as the stupidity of officers who are unwilling or unable to separate good discipline and common sense from stupidity and "looking good" soldiering. As Bourne comments after two soldiers are killed by a German bomb while on parade just behind the battefront:

They post men with fieldglasses and whistles to give warning of enemy aircraft; the troops are ordered to show themselves as little as possible in the streets, and to keep close to the houses, and the [military] police are told to make themselves a nuisance to any thoughtless kid who forgets; and then, having taken all these precautions, fifty men are paraded in the middle of the street opposite the orderly-room, as a target, I suppose, and are kept standing there for twenty minutes or half-an-hour. It's a bloody nice kind of war.

In the end it is the common soldier who must bear the burden of the war. As the narrator notes:

. . . that is what is called, in the British Army, the chain of responsibility, which means that all responsibility for the errors of their superior officer is borne eventually by private soldiers in the ranks.

Bourne, too, is one of the soldiers;

and yet he is clearly from the upper classes. He had joined up in the ranks because he had wanted the experience of soldiering, before going off to become an officer. Now, though others will drive him to the point where he is about to leave to get his commission, he feels that he has learned nothing of real use from the bloody business of war.

Over them all hangs the impact and darkness of the war. About the soldiers, the narrator tells us:

[M]en had reverted to a more primitive stage in their development, and had become nocturnal beasts of prey, hunting each other in packs. This was the uniformity, quite distinct from the effects of military discipline, which their nature had imposed on them. There is an extraordinary voracity in war, which strips man of every conventional covering he has, and leaves him to face a fact as naked and inexorable as himself.

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Above all, *The Middle Parts of Fortune* is a story of the connection between men. There is no false picture of what the men feel, no false view from officer country, or false sense of class identity. Men and officer are judged only by how they stand the terrible trials of the trenches. For the coward who has run away and then escapes the firing squad to run away again, they hold no brook:

It was about as bad as it could be, and if one were to ask any man who had been through that spell of fighting what ought to be done in the case of Miller, there could only have been one answer: 'Shoot the bugger.'

It is not the horror that holds the men together, for:

Men are bound together more closely by the trivial experiences they have shared, than by the most sacred obligations; and already his memory was haunted by outstretched hands seek-

ing rescue from oblivion, and faces half submerged to which he could give no name.

Strangers to this world of death and horror, we find ourselves inexorably drawn into the world of the dying Somme battles. Siegfried Sasson's lines haunt the story:

They leave their trenches, going  
over the top  
While time ticks blank and busy on  
their wrists  
And hope, with furtive eyes and  
grappling fists  
Flounders in the mud.  
O Jesu, make it stop!

Like Achilles, Bourne mourns the death of his friend Martlow:

Men passed out of sight like that, and seemed to leave very little trace. Their term had been completed. Martlow, for some reason he could not grasp, persisted in his memory, seemed to be only out of sight, behind the hut, as it were, or even on the point of coming through the door.

Also like Achilles, Bourne will follow his friend to become one of those buried in the endless cemeteries of Flanders or a name inscribed on the rolls of missing. And we are left with a haunting sense of loss—a feeling that no other war novel that I have ever read conveys. This, then, is a novel for those who really want to think about war. It is quite simply the greatest piece of literature about World War I.

US  MC

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>>Ernest Hemingway, in his introduction to *Men at War: The Best War Stories of All Time*, had this to say about the book reviewed here:

To . . . sweeten our library shelves, this book publishes a part of 'Her Privates We' originally published, unexpurgated, in a limited edition in England as 'The Middle Parts of Fortune.' It is the finest and noblest book of men in war that I have ever read. I read it over once each year to remember how things really were so that I will never lie to myself nor to anyone else about them.