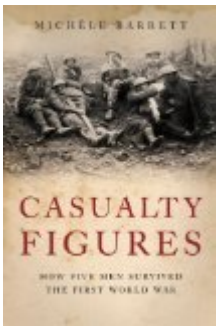
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michele Barrett. *Casualty Figures: How Five Men Survived the First World War..*
London and New York: Verso Books, 2008. 224 pp $24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-84467-230-1.



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Published on H-War (December, 2008)

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I make no apologies for the shortness of this review. *Casualty Figure*s, a slender tome (158 pages of actual text) is also short, and is a strange beast to boot. It is by Michèle Barrett, a professor of modern literary and cultural theory at the School of English and Drama, University of London, and the author or co-author of such other works as *Women's Oppression Today* (1988), *The Anti-Social Family* (1985), and *Politics of Diversity* (1986). Barrett claims that this new offering on World War One is a "biography" of five ordinary soldiers who endured the war to end all wars, and how they dealt with its horrors, both at the front and after the war's end (p. xii).By contrast, Barrett's publisher contradicts her claim and pronounces her work to be "history" (dust jacket). Sadly, her book is neither, but a strange pastiche of five men's stories--four officers and one non-commissioned officer. The common thread linking these disparate men, according to Barrett, is that each was an alleged victim of "shell shock," or, as it is more correctly known today, "battle exhaustion" or Operational Stress. Annoyingly, she applies the widely acknowledged misnomer, "shell shock," to the condition of battle exhaustion throughout the book, never demonstrating to us that she has a firm grasp of the medical condition or acknowledging the fact that it was, by the middle of the war, known to have no direct correlation to the concussive effects of artillery. It was a veteran medical officer serving with in the First Battalion, Royal Fusiliers in the Great War, Lord Moran, who understood that its cause was psychological and first used the analogy of a man's courage being a bank account. He later claimed in his pioneering book *The Anatomy of Courage* (1945) based on his private journals kept during the Great War, that no man has an endless stock of courage in war, and that any man's reserve can be very quickly depleted depending on the circumstances. "A man's courage is his capital and he is always spending," he wrote in 1945, continuing: "The call on the bank may only be the drain of the front line or it may be a sudden draft which threatens to close the account. His will is perhaps almost destroyed by intensive shelling, by heaving

bombing, or by a bloody battle, or it is gradually used up by monotony, by exposure, by the loss of the support of stauncher spirits on whom he has come to depend, by physical exhaustion, by a wrong attitude to danger, to casualties, to war, to death itself."[1]

While ***The Anatomy of Courage,*** with its penetrating psychological insights and its high literary quality, (Moran was Sir Winston Churchill's personal physician) is a genuine examination of fighting men at the sharp end and during its aftermath,***Casualty Figures*** is not. Barrett does not offer us any new insights on the face of battle in the Great War, nor do we ever really learn what events truly shaped these five men's life experiences, for the author provides only the most superficial contextual backdrops for each of her characters.

For example, the chapter on Captain Douglas Darling, MC (Military Cross), of the Canadian Machine Gun Corps (the shortest chapter in a short book) is sparse to say the least. There is little or no information on who Darling the man really was, except for some cryptic information gleaned from his attestation papers and fleshed out with some sketchy family oral history. We know he was a young Scottish solicitor who immigrated to Canada (date unknown) and took up ranching in British Columbia's Fraser River valley before joining up in 1915 at the age of 28. This lack of biographical detail, coupled with Barrett quoting extensively from Colonel G. W. L. Nicholson's slender 1964 history of the Canadian army in World War One, does little to mitigate the paucity of information we need in order to understand "Who was Captain Darling?" War diaries, regimental histories, or other family members' correspondence (i.e., more in-depth research) could have been deployed to provide a clearer portrait of the man and the environments, human and physical, that shaped his military service and life after the war.

Barrett never manages to convince the reader that she understands Darling's personal experiences, despite access to Darling's letters home to his fiancée, which are lean to say the least. Most soldiers in Darling's situation sought to play down the danger and lethality of their circumstances to loved ones, though he does admits once or twice that he is "nervous." This simple statement is enough however for Doctor Barrett to pronounce him a "shell-shock" survivor, though we never find out whether Darling is a victim of "bloody battle" or "monotony." She dutifully reports that Darling died six years after the war, his family convinced that "shell shock" was the principal cause of his death despite an official certificate clearly stating the cause of death as meningitis (p. 65).

Instead of making these men come alive in her narrative and letting them tell their stories through a multitude of credible sources, Barrett allows them to remain flat and somewhat mundane--"casualty figures" in their own right. This might explain why she feels compelled to digress into discussions of war artists, or the war poets, to add (one must assume) some "literary context" or color for the less erudite reader.

At times I was reminded of Paul Fussell's brilliant book ***The Great War and Modern Memory*** (1976), ***not*** because of any similarities or parallels, but because of how awful her prose is compared to Fussell's or Moran's works--vastly superior books, both written by veterans who knew their material intimately. Barrett is out of her depth, and one wonders what the editorial staff at Verso Books were thinking in deciding the reading public needed her suspect "analysis."

Towards the end of ***Casualty Figures***, in what can only be described as an uninspired conclusion, Barrett passes judgement on her own book with these words: "The stories of the men in ***Casualty Figures*** are affecting in a way that is not to do with memory, and only about family history for the immediate descendants of these men [***sic***].

They speak to us not because of nostalgia, or sentimentality, or a supposed 'cultural memory,' but because they illuminate the personal and human consequences of war" (pp.157-158).

If the reader truly wants illumination, or a book which will speak to the face of battle for soldiers during and after the Great War, then don't waste your time on the poorly researched, poorly written ***Casualty Figures***. The serious scholar would be better served by reading the many excellent books already out there on the human condition in the Great War, including the two already mentioned in this review.[2]

If Barrett has achieved one thing with ***Casualty Figures***, it is her unintentional commemoration of five survivors of the Great War. This book constitutes their second epitaph. May they now rest in peace.

Note

[1]. Lord Moran, ***The Anatomy of Courage*** (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), xii.

[2]. For the Canadian Expeditionary Corps, see Desmond Morton's ***When Your Number's Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War*** (Toronto: Random House, 1993). For the British Army, see Denis Winter's ***Death's Men: Soldiers of the Great War*** (London: Penguin Books, 1992); or Malcolm Brown, ***Tommy Goes to War*** (London: The History Press, 1994). For the Australian Corps see Bill Gammadge's ***The Broken War: Australian Soldiers in the Great War*** (London: Penguin Books, 1984).

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Citation: Ian McCulloch. Review of Barrett, Michele. *Casualty Figures: How Five Men Survived the First World War.*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. December, 2008.

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