

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Edward J. Klekowski, Libby Klekowski. *Eyewitnesses to the Great War: American Writers, Reporters, Volunteers and Soldiers in France, 1914-1918*. Jefferson: McFarland & Co., Publishers, 2012. 261 pp. \$38.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-6348-0.

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Published on Jhistory (October, 2012)

Commissioned by Heidi Tworek

Eyewitnesses to the Great War: American Writers, Reporters, Volunteers and Soldiers in France, 1914-1918

The husband-wife team of Ed and Libby Klekowski, retired Connecticut academics, has written a *momento mori* inviting readers to return to the almost forgotten horrors of World War I. Now that we are approaching the centennial of that unsuccessful “war to end all wars,” it might be worth heeding their invitation. The Klekowskis have written a book well worth reading, but the trip through these pages turns grim and deathly. For historians of journalism, there is useful information on American war correspondents, though much of the book deals with other Americans such as ambulance drivers.

This text—partly a digest of eyewitness reports published elsewhere and partly a travelogue (the Klekowskis having recently retraced some of the journeys of the eyewitnesses they write about) starts modestly enough: “The book views the events of 1914 to 1918 through the eyes of Americans who were there” (p. 1). This book is the outcome of the Klekowskis’ fascination with reading the journals and memoirs of talented writers—especially New Englanders. The connections between the writers also fascinate the authors and narrow the focus of the book. Enhancing the authors’ interests in biography and revealing self-reports is the fact that they have visited many of the battlefields that they describe.

The book starts *literarily*: letters from Edith Wharton (“the first American to visit Lorraine [in 1915] and survive the experience,” p. 7) writing to the novelist Henry James related what Wharton saw on a trip from Paris to Verdun. Officially, the trip with two companions in her Mercedes touring car was an inspection tour of army hospitals and a delivery of materials. Wharton’s trip reports (published in *Scribner’s Magazine*, stateside) soon became a public relations win for the French government seeking American support in its life-and-death struggle.

Wharton witnessed blasted villages, supply columns in mud, wasteful bayonet charges against heavy

weapons, terrain fought over time and again, and horrors for both sides in the conflict. Although Wharton, a celebrity in Europe, was traveling at the front on a military pass, she was barred from the most intimate front line experiences. However, she did indeed witness vicious fighting from afar. The grittier details in the book thus come from others who were fighting in the same neighborhoods through which Wharton and company traveled.

Some American volunteers had arrived soon after the war’s outbreak to drive ambulances. The Klekowskis neatly recap the formation of the American Ambulance Field Service (AAFS) and sketch the leading personalities of ambulance organizations and their bickering, which tinged the humanitarian efforts they are remembered and honored for. An estimated 3,000 Americans eventually arrived on the western front to haul the wounded from field stations to hospitals, and to haul bandages or other supplies back to the front. Since the enemy treated everyone in their sights equally, volunteer status was no guarantee of safety and some 131 AAFS ambulance attendants died.

The Klekowskis also follow how some ambulance volunteers transferred to more dashing squads. For example, some joined what became the Lafayette Esquadrielle, bought a couple of lion cubs for mascots, and learned to shoot German aircraft from the sky. Service as a pilot was even more risky than ambulance driving: of the thirty-eight Americans who flew in the Esquadrielle, ten were eventually killed. Eventually, after government propaganda, the desperation of the Allies, and the sinking of American ships by Germans subs all made their impact on our nation, the American army answered the call “over there.” That turning point (in the fall of 1917) is also sketched, and writer/participants increased in numbers as General “Black Jack” Pershing led khaki-clad troops

into French and Belgian fields—where their experiences sometimes proved memorably horrible.

Perhaps most relevant for JHistory readers is the chapter on those who covered the war for American newspapers. That chapter, “Writers and Reporters,” also describes reporters who filed their stories from the German side and sometimes reflected the overoptimistic German view of the situation. (Initially, the United States was neutral, and Germany hosted American reporters.) However, the most remembered reporter was Richard Harding Davis and the Klekowskis add some entertaining details to his history. But they also omit some: for example, they left untouched the story of how Davis was arrested by the Germans, who thought he might be an Allied spy, and the French did likewise!

While the Klekowskis do an admirable job of explaining how the higher powers came to blows in poppy-covered fields, they excel at noting the small details of the trenches. The reader is reminded of the human debris scattered in the no-man’s land between Allied and German trenches: “hundreds of mangled forms ... arms, legs, heads scattered disjointedly everywhere” (p. 30) When trenched opponents had been at each others’ throats for a while, the terrain became one gigantic, churned garbage heap, filled with discarded bottles and rusting tin cans,

as well as the detritus of combat: shrapnel, barbed wire, scattered ordnance, the fragments of weapons. Even battlefield rats are described as flourishing until they looked more like oversized cats—grown fat on human flesh. Included in this book are a few well-chosen photos to illustrate each grim point.

Throughout the telling, the authors keep the reader oriented with simplified maps, descriptions of the lay of the land, and simplified cause-and-effects explanations. The maps, especially, are a boon. This text is not written as a primary source; rather, its charm lies in the genius of selection and arrangement. That, plus the witty comments of the authors, makes a “good read,” though a very sorrowful one. It is hard to imagine a reader finishing this book without the thought, “My God, what a needless waste of humanity!” That, really, is the thesis of this text. In the Klekowskis’ explorations of battlefields and written records, more riveting data has turned up—more stories—so the authors plan yet another book with the tentative title *First Edith Wharton, Then Pershing*.

This entertaining (and shocking) book echoes the plea of A.A. Milne: “Once more I beg you all... tear away the veil of sentimental mysticism through which you have looked at war, and try to see it as it really is.” In this the authors have done a fine job.

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Citation: Kenneth Sexton. Review of Klekowski, Edward J.; Klekowski, Libby, *Eyewitnesses to the Great War: American Writers, Reporters, Volunteers and Soldiers in France, 1914-1918*. Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. October, 2012.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36474>



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