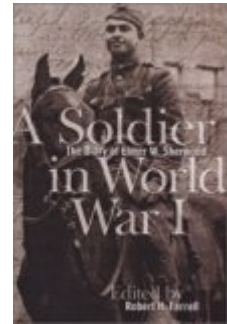


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert H. Ferrell, ed. *A Soldier in World War I: The Diary of Elmer W. Sherwood*. Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 2004. xvii + 193 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87195-173-1.

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## Into the Trenches?

“Although maintaining a diary was against army regulations, [Elmer] Sherwood and many other soldiers violated the rule...” (p. 170). Robert H. Ferrell’s observation about army regulations offers insight into the special insight that the Elmer Sherwood diary offers into the life of a typical World War I soldier. Readers looking to glean more about the experience of Hoosiers in World War I combat will find gems in the book that demonstrate Sherwood’s humanity in the face of barbarous conditions. Yet the above quotation also hints to the limitations of this slim volume: it is buried in an endnote to a diary, which means few will likely even be aware of the uniqueness of the source. Although this book is clearly presented with explanatory head notes provided by the author and nice photos, it seems difficult to agree with Ferrell that the diary is a “Hoosier classic,” which, in the words of the editor “is a simply wonderful drawing, a veritable photograph one might say, of what it was like to go through a great war” (p. xiii).

Elmer Sherwood was born in Linton, Indiana, in 1896. Raised on stories of his grandfather’s service in the Civil War, Sherwood had enrolled at Indiana University as an English major. Like thousands of other Americans, in 1917, Sherwood heeded the call to arms from President Woodrow Wilson and enlisted in the armed forces. Sherwood joined the Indiana National Guard, which soon became the 150th Field Artillery Regiment. Rushed through training and into the service, Sherwood’s unit, part of General Douglas MacArthur’s Rainbow Division, was among the first American troops to see combat in the Great War. The 42nd Division saw action through-

out the decisive 1918 campaigns, most notably in the Meuse-Argonne offensive between October and November. Sherwood’s service did not end with armistice on November 11; much to the private’s dismay, his regiment remained in Europe until May of 1919.

Ferrell pieces together Sherwood’s tale from both published and unpublished diaries that the soldier kept. The story is not entirely a new one, because Sherwood published two volumes about his World War experience: *Rainbow Hoosier* (1919) and *Diary of a Rainbow Veteran* (1929). This latter title Ferrell does not mention by name. He does argue, however, that in both cases, Sherwood had filtered some of the information, or embellished the diaries after the fact. *A Soldier in World War I* returns to Sherwood’s original diaries, wherever possible, and supplements those with published accounts in cases where the original diary had been lost. Consequently, Ferrell’s edited volume is both the most complete and the most historically accurate of the reminiscences under Elmer Sherwood’s name.

Eight of the book’s twelve chapters cover active combat, while the final four cover Sherwood’s duties as a peacekeeper throughout France, Belgium, and Germany between November 1918 and his return to the United States in May 1919. Each chapter begins with useful head notes, which place the diary in the greater context of grand strategy of the war. Drawing upon his vast experience writing about World War I and editing other volumes, Ferrell deftly provides readers with necessary information about the war’s overall scope.

The volume succeeds best in conveying the monotony of trench warfare through the eyes of the twenty-two year-old diarist. Digging, mostly at night, preoccupied Sherwood during his tour of duty. Lice and other vermin were Sherwood's ubiquitous companions. But Sherwood's existence had its more harrowing moments as well. Dismembered corpses, the threat of mustard gas, and the constant thunder of barraging artillery affected Sherwood, who wondered: "Could any thing be more terrible" (p. 63)? During the intense Meuse-Argonne offensive, some of his closest comrades were killed or wounded, which the soldier claimed was "a great blow to me because tho we have lost men on every front these fellows are my best pals..." (p. 90). Most of his entries, however, are a paragraph long at most, which means readers have to connect a number of the loose ends for themselves.

Sherwood showed a greater propensity for reflection after the armistice in November 1918. Stationed primarily in Germany, Sherwood also traveled throughout France when opportunities presented themselves. In these four final chapters, Sherwood reflects on the meaning of the war and the cause for which he had fought. Perhaps the most gripping chapter in the entire book depicts Sherwood's journey to Paris in February and early March 1919. The AWOL soldier describes both the thrills of the city and the fears of being caught throughout the account.

The book is not, however, without its problems, chief of which stem from the limited narrative imagination of the diarist. Time and again, this reader found himself wanting Sherwood to reflect more on the experiences: the sights, the smells, the sounds, and above all, the thoughts that plagued him between 1917 and 1919. Perhaps the furtive nature in which the diary was kept

prevented Sherwood from such observations, but their absence limits the effectiveness of the volume.

In trying to convey his experiences, at one point Sherwood claims "one could not realize what a soldier passed through during the war without being one himself" (p. 126). Much of this volume, unfortunately, supports Sherwood's statement. For instance, Sherwood did not even reflect upon the sight of New York Harbor upon his return to the United States. When in need of a more imaginative narrator, Ferrell footnotes the unpublished diaries of Vernon Kniptash compiled by E. Bruce Geelhoed at Ball State University. One wonders why the Kniptash diaries, which appear to benefit from some of the very qualities of description that Sherwood's lacks, have gone unpublished.

The volume also might have been improved in two critical areas. First, the book contains numerous photographs, but only three maps that help to situate Sherwood's experiences. Second, the Indiana Historical Society Press elected to use endnotes rather than footnotes. This trend seems to dominate the market, but the Ferrell volume illustrates the need for references on the bottom of the page, rather than the back of the book. Most of Ferrell's most astute observations and contextualization occur in the endnotes, meaning that those curious souls who actually read the notes must thumb back and forth in order to learn vital information.

In the long run, *A Soldier in World War I* might prove to be most useful for a future Sherwood biographer or for authors detailing the general experiences of American soldiers during the Great War. In this respect, Robert H. Ferrell and the Indiana Historical Society Press have done future scholars a service by providing them with published raw materials from which to work.

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