

A. J. Liebling. *World War II Writings*. New York: Library of America, 2008. xiii + 1089 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-59853-018-6.



Reviewed by Lee Baker

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Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

A. J. Liebling was an author and war correspondent for the *New Yorker* during the Second World War, from 1939 through the German capitulation. For much of this time he was in France (before the German invasion), but he also managed to spend time in and report from England, Tunisia, and even Germany during the last days of the war. His writing is crisp and wry, and he had an ability, unique among war correspondents, to capture moments, people, and events in touching ways. It is a trite cliché, but he truly put a human (American) face on the war. He easily mingled with all ranks and ratings, from the lowest privates responsible for carrying supplies to generals in charge of artillery batteries, and records these encounters with a charming ease. He even managed to talk to black soldiers without condescension (at least, as he reports) as well as to rural and urban Americans of all social and economic classes. This ease with people from a variety of backgrounds (despite his own rather exalted social status, as he came from a rather prestigious New

York family) makes the stories much more human and interesting.

Thus, the book provides a fascinating picture of Americans actually at war (as opposed to those on the home front). Yet, it is not clear why the Library of America, known for publishing the works of the founding fathers as well as American political classics, chose the writings of a journalist from this particular war for inclusion in their collection, especially because no grand theme unites the stories. Nor were they written for a political cause, but rather to fulfill the author's job requirements. Perhaps its publication is part of the nostalgia for the "greatest generation" that has been so prevalent recently. If so, this is an excellent addition to that genre and will bolster and make much more sophisticated the rather hackneyed (and chauvinistically outdated) idea that freedom-loving Americans saved the world from authoritarian Prussian types in Germany. The book contains fabulous stories about ordinary Americans at war, but it is oddly out of step with recent literature, which has emphasized the global nature of

the war by focusing on the writings of Soviets, Poles, and other non-western Europeans, and on fronts other than the African and western, which involved primarily the Americans. Liebling's reporting is therefore old-fashioned and offers an exclusively American view of the fronts where Americans fought. Do we really need yet another patriotic American rendition of D-Day, the Battle of the Bulge, and the fighting in North Africa? The answer in this case is a resounding "yes," although not for reasons some might expect.

The idea that freedom-loving Americans fought to rid the world of tyranny is as outdated as a Willy's jeep, and is not what makes this book valuable. Liebling did not pretend to have access to high-ranking officers who had the "big picture" in mind (the generals he met were low-ranking men with local commands); rather, and quite the opposite, he focused on cooks, supply men (including blacks), artillery loaders, and GIs who actually fought the war. Rather than looking for a hero who fit a certain stereotype, he realized that real heroes were men who camped under the stars without knowing if an artillery shell might land in their midst. He spent his time getting to know real men from all over the United States and provides a picture of daily life among American soldiers and how they viewed the war and the world. The reader encounters here not hackneyed heroism, but rather stories of scared young men doing their best to survive in an honorable manner. With all the fables being passed around during the years since the sixtieth anniversary of D-Day, these stories will set their audiences straight about what the war was really like for average American men.

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