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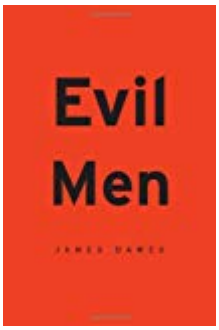
James Dawes. *Evil Men.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013. 280 pp. $25.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-07265-7.



Reviewed by James Williams

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Evil Men is a descriptive yet deceptive title for James Dawes's book. At one level, this is a book built on interviews that Dawes conducted with Japanese veterans of the Sino-Japanese War, 1937-45. Each man had committed war crimes--for example, committing serial rape, killing children, performing vivisections, and spreading toxic biological agents. These experiences, however, are only a touchstone of the book. The connection to Dawes's subject is mainly through his sense of dissonance, trying to reconcile his impressions of these frail, congenial octogenarians with their acts as young men. That dissonance is the real meat of the book, which is a sweeping exploration of human behavior, ethics, culture, trends in literary criticism, and recent U.S. military operations and policies.

Understanding the book requires understanding Dawes's background and purpose. He is a professor of English at Macalester College in Minnesota and founder/director of the college's Program in Human Rights and Humanitarianism. His program seeks to prepare undergraduates to work in the field of human rights. As a scholar and teacher, Dawes's purpose is to take the reader on a personal journey to meet and try to understand a small group of men who committed gross violations of human rights. Along the way, he displays an encyclopedic knowledge on a wide range of related topics.

It is hard and probably unproductive to separate the specific content of this book from its organization and method. *Evil Men* is more than a read; it is an experience. The book has many layers, with countless twists and turns, likely to frustrate and confuse the reader. The preface begins: "This book is about atrocity: what it looks like, what it feels like, what causes it, and how we might stop it" (p. xi). The essence of atrocity is trauma, and the book's organization induces a mild experience of trauma, which transcends order and language. The flow is unmarked and unmapped, beginning with the absence of chapters. The preface of just over 3 pages rolls into 226 pages of text, followed by notes. As he says in the preface, Dawes moves in the manner of a photog-

rapher, zooming in and out, panning here and there. The discussion morphs, rather than shifts. It is sometimes hard to remember the subject of a section. A reader who wants to leap to the bottom line or conclusion will be frustrated and defeated. However, there is a clear method to this madness: Dawes wants the reader to feel something of what trauma is like, because that is the essence of the atrocities that underlie the entire book and its subject. In so doing, although he does not put it in exactly these terms, Dawes addresses a central question of the human condition, captured by Jesus's last words on the cross: "My God, My God, ***why have you forsaken me?***" As I sought some structure within the narrative, the dialectic in Saint Thomas Aquinas's ***Summa Theologica*** came to mind. The difference is that Aquinas clearly demarked each question, each premise, each objection, and each response. Dawes provides no such signage to the reader. ***Evil Men*** is immersion experience.

Coming at the book as a military historian with extensive experience in oral history, as well as in military operations, I was surprised to find so little content from Dawes's interviews. Extracts from his interviewees' stories are short and sparse, appearing almost as random bits and almost incidental to the discussion. The overwhelming bulk of the content is summary and discussion of various theories and views on a wide array of aspects of literature somehow related to questions about human rights. An example appears early, when Dawes explores how young men of quite ordinary backgrounds and normal sensibilities became serial rapists and callous or even enthusiastic killers. One loop on this subject describes Stanley Milgram's experiments in 1960 to see how people would behave when told to inflict pain on another person. Placed in a nominally subordinate position--even though the subjects were volunteers under no obligation--the subjects continued to deliver increasing levels of electrical shock, even when they heard the supposed recipient screaming in pain and even going silent, presumably from passing out (pp. 23-26). Dawes's point is that, if people completely free to refuse and walk out could act in this way, there is nothing remarkable about young men under extreme physical and emotional duress acting as they did. The discussion of Milgram's findings is only one of several ways that Dawes accounts for the conversion of average human beings to monsters.

Another major thread that runs through the book further explains the scarcity of interview extracts. That is the ethicality of telling atrocity stories. There is a looming emphasis about the motives and effects of such telling on various parties. As an outsider to the human rights field, I was struck by a seeming preoccupation with guilt. No motive or action escapes second, third, or even fourth guessing. Dawes speaks of both the redemptive aspects of storytelling for the perpetrator and the potential for inflicting more trauma on the victim. Retelling reminds the victim of the first harm and, since the perpetrator controls disclosure, reasserts the perpetrator's power over the victim (p. 140). Dawes also discusses the pornographic, voyeuristic aspects of attention to such stories.

Another explanation for the piecemeal presentation of extracts is that "they're unbearable to read at length, without some emotional break" (p. 151). This parallels something I found in interviewing a former U.S. prisoner of war of the Japanese. Just to recall some experiences was excruciating, even after more than forty years. To enable him to tell his whole story took interrupting him as he repeatedly neared emotional meltdown, shifting to another topic, giving him time to recover, and then resuming his core story where we had stopped. Perhaps this emotional intensity and the need to mediate it hold for the reader, as opposed to the teller. I do not know.

An irony in Dawes's tale of his experiences is how he found himself becoming something of a pariah because of his work. He learned not to tell other academics about what he was doing in

terms of "confessions" (p. 138), and the pattern of silence broadened. Here his experience partly mirrors that of his interviewees, who were shunned and rejected when they returned home and tried to tell about their experiences (pp. 195-196). I was struck by how Dawes's experience as a scholar parallels that of many combat veterans returning home. Vets quickly learn that their families and friends do not want to hear about their experiences and the concerns that matter most to the vet.

One key topic that Dawes addresses is violence against women, which includes the use of "comfort women"; rape; and widespread, gratuitous violence--often ending in murder--that soldiers committed in the field. Dawes explains the policy of having "comfort stations" based on Japanese authorities' expressed concern about reducing unregulated rape, which they saw inducing hostility among the occupied population. However, he puts rape and sexual violence directed against women in a larger context of battlefield violence. He notes that "officers found rape a useful tool 'to stimulate aggression' in their soldiers" (p. 92). Taken a step further, it is simply one expression of a "structuring of an interior self," in which masculinity is competitive and demands suppressing signs of femininity (p. 95). This suppression went hand in glove with brutality throughout indoctrination and training. Through such brutality, the Japanese army created unquestioning obedience among subordinates. "Pornography, male initiation rituals, and hazing and bonding practices serve the important function of killing the girl inside. And they lay the groundwork for killing the girl outside" (p. 97). In this discussion, as many others, Dawes's examples and analogies reach far beyond the specific groups, times, and places to embrace common practices in everyday life across many cultures. However, he also identifies mass rape as a strategic weapon because of women's association with the community. "In one act of aggression, the collective spirit of women and of the nation is broken, leaving a reminder long after the troops depart" (p. 99). If the woman survives, she becomes a symbol of her nation's defeat.

Despite the author's explanation of its limited inclusion in the book, further discussion is needed about the peculiar background and status of the men Dawes interviewed. All had been prisoners of the Chinese for several years after the war. In stark contrast to the vicious brutality the Japanese inflicted on the Chinese, the Chinese applied "the lenient policy"--what Americans called "brainwashing" and the Japanese who lived through it called "enlightenment" (pp. 160-163). These men returned to Japan with a radically different perspective. Talking about their crimes as a cautionary tale to discourage militarism gave purpose to their lives, and their eagerness to tell their stories was a kind of personal redemption. However, these men also met denial and rejection within Japan. Dawes explicitly notes his reservations about even discussing this aspect, for fear that this discussion of how these Japanese were brought to "confess" might lead to discounting their accounts (p. 165).

Another component that would have benefited from deeper discussion is the book's place in literary and historical context. Dawes states that the 1990s marked a watershed in literary and cultural studies--"a moment sometimes referred to as the 'ethical turn'" (p. 215). Ethical criticism shifted from seeing "literary texts as forms of clarifying 'moral reasoning' that reflect and inform our lives and cultivate our ethical responsibilities; and those influenced by deconstruction ... who argue that literature offers nothing like clear moral reasoning but rather an experience of 'undecidability' that is ethical precisely insofar as it interrupts our relationship with confident ethical knowledge" (p. 215). Dawes fits into the latter mode: "Sometimes I think that all the paradoxes of representation described in this book, all the ways it is impossible to get it right for others, are starting points in just this way" (p. 216).

The book fits into the context of post-9/11 U.S. actions and policies. Some of Dawes's interviews coincided with the U.S. invasion of Iraq and its near aftermath. His interviewees were not judgmental. They were acutely conscious of U.S. actions and expressed concerns in light of their own national and personal histories (pp. 168-169). Moreover, Dawes directly ties in recent U.S. events in exploring torture and euphemisms to take the ethical edge off of actions (pp.73-79).

Finally, this book is not one of despair. Dawes describes how some of the same mechanisms used to induce violence can be used to discourage it. He also notes the power of art--notably, poetry and song--to let victims break out of the kind of imprisonment that having been subjected to violence creates. He notes the importance of speaking out: for example, he writes, "to despair is to make a decision with consequences," and "visible dissent promotes defections" (pp. 114, 122).

In closing I would like to offer a summary comment. Over more than thirty years, as a practitioner and teacher/student, I dealt with ethical issues related to military affairs. As a Vietnam veteran, in the early 1980s, I required my history students at the Naval Academy to read Michael Walzer's *Just and Unjust Wars* (1977). As a historian for multinational peacekeeping forces in Bosnia, I studied atrocities and visited sites and refugee camps. I talked with people from the nongovernmental organizations and the United Nations who dealt with these events and issues flowing from them, including war crimes investigations. However, I never imagined the size and diversity of literature on these matters. Searching databases to put this book into scholarly context was eye-opening. Even limiting the JSTOR search to "human rights" + "war" + "war crimes"--and only reviews since 2000 that I could access in English--yielded 1,080 items. After scanning a couple hundred citations ranked as most relevant, I would offer that--if you are going to read only one book on this topic--*Evil Men* is probably the one to read. It may stand for quite some time.

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