



2011-048

Jonathan Marwil, *Visiting Modern War in Risorgimento Italy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. Pp. ix, 262. ISBN 978-0-230-10813-4.

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This book is disadvantaged by its title and its cover. The title suggests a case study in battlefield tourism during a war unfamiliar to non-historians. The cover, showing a group of civilians in nineteenth-century dress poring over a map against a now-bucolic background, reinforces that impression. The result is likely to inspire a “who cares?” reaction from anyone but specialists.

That will be a mistake. Jonathan Marwil (Univ. of Michigan) has written a stimulating and suggestive analysis of the Austro-Italian War of 1859. Comprehensively researched and clearly presented, this is not a diplomatically or operationally focused treatment. Instead it situates the conflict in the contexts of “memory and mourning” both public and private—not merely for an Italy that still views 1859 as its second war for independence, but in the broader spectrum of European and world reactions to the first war that was essentially “modern” in its pace and deadliness.

Until 1859, the face of battle had been presented in anodyne forms. Self-protecting memories structured participants’ narratives. Sketches made on the spot had an abstract, artistic quality. The themes of war art ranged from heroic pathos to heroic posturing. The War of 1859 was the first where battlefield dead were photographed. There were plenty of subjects. The casualties at Solferino were higher than those of any one day in the American Civil War. Magenta gave its name to a shade of red dye—a dark shade, dark as blood puddled on fields and paths, or dried on once-brilliant uniforms.

And yet it was all over in a span of weeks. The first major battle was fought on 4 June; the Armistice of Villafranca was concluded on 12 July. For a Europe accustomed to drawn-out wars of attrition, with disease taking more lives than combat and civilians suffering worse than soldiers, the War of 1859 established a new paradigm: short, intense conflicts ending as much because of the shock they generated as from the outcomes of battle.

Small wonder, then, that observers and visitors of all sorts were drawn to northern Italy from a wide variety of motives: tourists, artists, military analysts—even parents seeking connection with lost sons. Their experiences shape Marwil’s account of the war as a state of mind as much as a story of battles and negotiations:

In telling the stories of the visitors to the battlefields of 1859, I have created a thickly peopled narrative.... Some [individuals] the reader will come to know well, others hardly at all. Their actions and testimonies matter most. The themes and arguments the book offers are embedded in the experiences and thoughts of the characters, much as in a work of fiction. Except that the people in this book and the things they say and do were as real as the battlefields they visited, either during or after the war. Although the form of this book will sometimes appear to be novelistic, there is nothing make believe in it (4).

The work’s opening chapters draw on the accounts of both participants and observers to describe the conflict’s background: the escalation of Piedmontese-Austrian antagonism, the involvement of Imperial France, the declaration of war and gathering of forces. Even the preliminary combats stunned those with no exposure to battlefields—or field hospitals. Napoleon III, in particular, was revolted by the stench of the blood, corpses, and excrement that are war’s inevitable accompaniment. Veterans of France’s colonial wars or the counterinsurgency operations in Italy and the Habsburg Empire during 1848–49 were shaken by the close-gripped butcher shops of Magenta and Solferino.

This was, in Marwil’s words, “serious war”; even civilians accompanying the armies understood that. Photographing the dead was as much a gesture of commemoration as an exercise in Grand Guignol. The fate of the wounded drew volunteer caregivers and inspired one, Swiss businessman Henri Dunant, to

found the Red Cross. In the months following Villafranca, the war was “set in memory” by authors and artists—but not in accord with traditional themes and formats. Ambulance wagons as well as bayonet charges now became subjects for painters.

If the war dead of France and Italy were displaced in memory by the greater hecatombs of 1866 and 1870–71, Italians assiduously kept public memories alive by monuments and ossuaries—the latter again a new manner of commemorating unidentified dead, consigned in earlier wars to anonymous, soon forgotten mass graves. English historian George M. Trevelyan apotheosized national hero Giuseppe Garibaldi in three volumes (1907/1909/1911), “part truth and part poetry” (213). And the war’s fiftieth anniversary was the occasion for feasts, celebrations, and parades whose tone prefigured Italy’s traumatic entry into a far greater conflict six years later.

In the end, half the speculation about the impact of 1859 on war proved accurate. Battlefields did become exponentially more terrible, casualties exponentially higher. But far from being jolted into making peace, governments and peoples girded themselves for years of attrition on a scale inconceivable in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the end, Dunant’s *Un Souvenir de Solferino* (1862), with its focus on the suffering of the wounded, became the conflict’s defining literary treatment, a classic of war literature. And his legacy of the Red Cross was, as Marwil puts it, “about the only thing that [mattered]” (228).