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WORLD WAR I: A NEW WAY OF NARRATING THE WAR AND A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON AN UNFAMILIAR CAMPAIGN:

Peter Englund, *The Beauty and the Sorrow: An Intimate History of the First World War*. New York: Knopf, 2011. Pp. xvi, 540. ISBN 978-0-307-59386-3.

Charles Townshend, *Desert Hell: The British Invasion of Mesopotamia*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2011. Pp. xxiv, 591. ISBN 978-0-674-0599-3.

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As we approach the hundredth anniversary of its inception, World War I, or, as Europeans are inclined to refer to it, the Great War, keeps its fascination. Scholarly interest in the war has never flagged, but in a world where the reading of books, particularly long ones, is said to be waning, authors and publishers seek to produce histories that will seem fresh to readers, rather than, say, another blow-by-blow account of the battle of the Somme, emphasizing the tragic waste of lives, etc.

Still, the war as a whole is unlikely to get a thoroughgoing reinterpretation anytime soon, so great is our investment in remembering it as a disaster that brought yet greater ones in its train. Any fundamental revision of our understanding of the war would require rethinking how we see the rest of the twentieth century, not to mention the decades preceding the war.

Neither of the two books under review here attempts such a feat. Each has a particular way of dealing with its subject, but their titles alone signal the standard view of the war. “Hell,” the operative word in the title of Charles Townshend’s new study of the Mesopotamian campaign, evokes traditional images of First World War battlefields, and “Sorrow,” while common to every war, has a special resonance for a conflict whose ten million dead inspired a culture of memorialization focused on the war’s victims, not its heroes.

The Swedish historian Peter Englund¹ (Uppsala Univ.) does not take readers into the postwar era except to suggest, as have others, that we can thank the war for the emergence of Adolf Hitler, whose voice is the last we hear in a book of many voices and the only one not filtered through Englund’s graceful prose. By “deconstruct[ing] this utterly epoch-making event into its smallest, most basic component—the individual” (xiii), Englund offers an “intimate history” of the war. The twenty men and women of his “*Dramatis Personae*” experienced the war in various contexts. Several, like the German seaman Richard Stumpf and Florence Farmborough, the English nurse who served with the Russian Army, may be familiar to readers. Others, notably Laura de Turczynowicz, the American wife of a Polish diplomat, and the German schoolgirl Elfride Kuhr, almost certainly will not. To appreciate Englund’s storytelling method, consider how he begins the section entitled “1914”:

Sunday, 2 August 1914
Laura de Turczynowicz is woken early
One morning in Augustow

What is the worst thing she can imagine? That her husband is ill, injured or even dead? That he has been unfaithful?

It has been a perfect summer. Not only has the weather been perfect—hot, sunny, and wonderful sunsets—but they have also moved into a newly built summer villa, tucked away by the lakes in the beautiful Augustow Forest. The children have played for days on end. She and her husband have often rowed out on the lake during the short, white nights of June to greet the rising sun. “All was peace and beauty ... a quiet life full of simple pleasure.”

1. His earlier work includes *The Battle That Shook Europe: Poltava and the Birth of the Russian Empire* (1992; rpt. NY: I.B. Tauris, 2003).

It has to be said that the simplicity of her life is relative. The large villa is superbly furnished. (5)

This is not fiction, but neither, as the passage makes clear, is Englund letting his “characters,” as he calls them, speak as they did on the pages of their books. Their stories are mediated through his voice, often quite effectively. Readers with only a passing knowledge of the war will also like the included chronology of important events for each year and footnotes—sometimes lengthy and not always sourced—that explain even such basic matters as shrapnel. In brief, the storytelling strategy adopted in *The Beauty and the Sorrow* will surely appeal to a broad general audience. Whether the war, or history generally, is well served by an intent to tell us what “it was like to be there” is another question. A grasp of how particular individuals felt in specific historical contexts does not necessarily ensure an understanding of those contexts or even the individuals involved. John Keegan, in his justly celebrated *The Face of Battle*,² strove to recreate what it was like to be at the battles of Agincourt, Waterloo, and the Somme, but the book offers much more than that. Readers of Peter Englund’s book are left, in the end, with the stories of twenty people, no less, but also no more.

Charles Townshend (Keele Univ.) has written a very different book from Englund’s, one clearly inspired by Great Britain’s role in the recent war in Iraq.³ Many Britons objected to the Blair government’s decision to ally itself with the United States, as was seen in the huge demonstration held in London to oppose the imminent invasion in February 2003. Six years later the Chilcot Inquiry was set up to examine not only the decision to go to war but its consequences. (The findings of the inquiry are due in 2013.) A similar inquiry into the British campaign in Mesopotamia, as Iraq was then known, followed the siege and surrender of British forces at Kut-al-Amara in April 1916. The story of that failure has often been told, though not so often as that of the more romantic but equally disastrous Gallipoli expedition of 1915. Townshend tells it very well and shares as a key primary source one of Englund’s characters—Edward Mousley. But he does much besides; indeed, his book is really two books trying to become one. The first four hundred pages or so describe the stumbling progress of the British in Mesopotamia until November 1916, when the army, under Gen. Stanley Maude, finally entered Baghdad. The last hundred pages sketch events from Maude’s death in November 1917 until 1925.

Evidently Townshend and/or his publisher decided that limiting the book to just the military campaign of 1914–16 would not do, given the events of the post-9/11 decade. For the unintended consequences of both Iraq wars have far exceeded their significance in and of themselves. Certainly this is true of the earlier war: prior to 1914, Townshend argues, “Britain had been one of the most cautious of imperial powers.” But in the years after the war, “something strange happened. Suddenly ... Britain grasped at an imperial expansion on a dizzying scale” (xxiii), even as its financial resources deteriorated. Unfortunately, the hurried quality of the book’s last hundred pages sharply contrasts with the measured, detailed pace of what has come before. That said, the whole is a joy to read.

Desert Hell also challenges received opinions. Its author, for example, is less critical of Gen. Charles Townshend, the commander at Kut during the siege, than are other historians. After noting that he is no relation to the general, “as far as I know,” he concludes that Townshend “was in some ways hard done by” (xiii–xiv), as those who served with him, like Edward Mousley, would have agreed. Fewer, however, would have concurred with the claim that the “hardships” they experienced in Turkish captivity after the surrender at Kut were “due to simple incompetence rather than deliberate policy” (306). Yet another example of Townshend’s fresh perspective on a familiar subject is his insistence that “oil was a secondary issue” in British thinking in 1914 and that “the real objective” of the campaign was to show the Arabs that they had British support (37–38).

Townshend has written a book for both general and academic readers. His division of the text into forty-one short chapters, as well as his bibliography and extensive footnotes will serve both audiences well. The same cannot be said for the volume’s mere three maps; the one that matters most, “The Middle East in 1914,” is virtually unusable.

2. NY: Viking, 1976.

3. His previous work includes (ed.) *The Oxford History of Modern War*, new ed. (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2005) and *Terrorism: A Very Short Introduction* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2012).