



The Ambulance Drivers: Hemingway, Dos Passos, and a Friendship Made and Lost in War by James McGrath Morris.

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The two American writers most associated with the Lost Generation and seen as influential stylists are F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. Forgotten is novelist John Dos Passos. Biographer James Morris' seeks to make good that omission in this well written narrative of the literary careers and friendship of Hemingway and Dos Passos, with emphasis on the latter's influence upon American literature.

Both physically and politically, the two men had little in common. Dos Passos was slight of build and had poor eyesight. Hemingway was built like an athlete. A committed left-wing pacifist, Dos Passos was politically active all his life, while the apolitical Hemingway was preoccupied with achieving commercial success as an author and projecting an image of personal "machismo." But, Morris writes, "their common pursuit ... trumped their differences: they were plotting a literary revolution. To them ... [World War I] had made traditional writing styles inadequate. Their generation needed its own voice, not one that imitated another from the past" (3).

In winter 1917, the twenty-one-year-old Dos Passos traveled to Spain, in part to escape family pressure to enter the business world. There he learned of the privately financed Norton-Harjes Ambulance Corps headquartered in Paris. He volunteered, more to experience the war than to assist those in need. His time as an ambulance driver reinforced his conviction that the war was a terrible mistake; as for the soldiers, "none of the poor devils whose mangled dirty bodies I take to the hospital in my ambulance really give a damn about the aims of this ridiculous affair" (30). Their injuries were more horrible than he could have imagined. But he felt that to convey the uselessness of the war he had to "experience more of it ... [and] throw the dice at every turn with the roisterer Death..." (29). When the United States entered the war in April 1917, the French ambulance venture ceased operations.

Dos Passos then traveled to Italy to join the Red Cross ambulance service and thereby evade the US military draft. There, in 1918, he met Hemingway, who had volunteered for the Red Cross because of the hero's welcome given a friend upon his return home after serving as an ambulance driver. He told family and friends that he could not serve in the military because of an (unverified) weak left eye. While in Italy, the two men shared their literary ambitions and the need for a new, twentieth-century writing style. Dos Passos's six-month stint with the Red Cross was about to end when he learned that military censors had been reading his correspondence and were concerned about his criticism of the war. He had also failed to respond to a draft board notice to appear for a physical. He returned home intent upon clearing up the confusion about his loyalty and making the case that his Red Cross work should exempt him from the draft. While in Italy and during his voyage home, he wrote a draft of his first successful novel, *Three Soldiers* (1921). Mean-

1. His earlier work includes *Pulitzer: A Life in Politics, Print, and Power* (NY: Harper, 2010) and *Eye on the Struggle: Ethel Payne, the First Lady of the Black Press* (NY: Amistad, 2015).

while Hemingway had an experience that inspired his own first successful novel, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926).

In July 1918, while delivering sweets to Italian soldiers, Hemingway was struck by shrapnel from a mortar shell. He claimed he then carried a (never identified) wounded soldier back to the field hospital. Over the years, his accounts of this rescue became more dramatic and his role more courageous. He returned home to a hero's welcome and used his convalescence to begin a writing career.

Dos Passos established a literary reputation long before Hemingway. *Three Soldiers*, based upon his wartime experiences, won critical acclaim for its unflinching depiction of the brutality of war. Some reviewers, however, chastised him for disparaging America's participation; one even said that Dos Passos would have been jailed, had he published it during the war. Over the next decade, his literary efforts concentrated on a critique of modern America, bearing fruit in his famous *U.S.A.* trilogy.² By this time, Hemingway had written two bestsellers: *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). Although these novels take place during wartime, both revolve around love affairs more than military action.

The subject of the Spanish Civil War attracted both men, Dos Passos for political reasons, Hemingway for purposes of reigniting his literary career—by the mid-1930s, he was more famous for being famous than for his recent fiction. Hence, war “was personal for him not political” (125). But the war undid their friendship. The increasingly conservative Dos Passos distrusted Soviet support for the anti-fascists, whereas Hemingway felt that Soviet intrusion upon military and political strategy was a necessity.

While both men continued to write, their critical and commercial successes were behind them. Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea* (1951) briefly restored his fame but by the mid-1950s he had become a caricature of himself. Perhaps sensing this, he committed suicide in 1960. Dos Passos lived long enough to see his works anointed as archetypes of modernist writing.

The story of Dos Passos and Hemingway has been told many times, and Morris adds little that is new and true about their careers and friendship. He also makes too much of Dos Passos's antiwar novel. Willa Cather's war story, *One of Ours* (1922), outsold *Three Soldiers* and won the Pulitzer Prize in 1923.

Morris's thesis is that the First World War's “lasting effect on Hemingway and Dos Passos distinguished them from other members of the Lost Generation. It forged their friendship, but in the end another war took it from them” (250). But both men served less than a year at the front, much of it waiting for orders or for vehicles to be repaired. Moreover, Dos Passos's antiwar feelings and belief in the need for a new style of writing to reflect the new era preceded his arrival in Europe. And Hemingway's aspirations for literary success had little to do with his reaction to the war. In fact, the plot of *The Sun Also Rises* appeared almost a decade earlier in Hugh Walpole's *The Dark Forest* (1917). Nevertheless, *The Ambulance Drivers* will serve as an excellent introduction to the careers of its two subjects.

2. *The 42nd Parallel* (1930), *1919* (1932), and *The Big Money* (1936).