

*A World on Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War.* Amanda Foreman. New York: Random House, 2011, \$20.00, paper, 807 pp.

*Reviewed by Sarah Lahey, Northwestern University*

Amanda Foreman's *A World on Fire* has taken the literary marketplace by storm. Named one of the "Top 10 Books of 2011" by the *New York Times* and earning similar accolades from *Publisher's Weekly*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Economist*, Foreman's book has engrossed popular readers and Civil War enthusiasts alike. Yet the question remains: Will this text prove an equal success within academia?

Enormous in scope, *A World on Fire* covers everything from pre-war debates about expanding slavery to the completion of the transatlantic cable in 1866. Foreman's level of detail could make even the most experienced archivist feel inadequate, and she deals with so many personal histories that her book begins with a *Dramatis Personae* including more than two hundred names. As Foreman states in her preface, she set out to create a sort of "history-in-the-round," bringing together a "vast panoply of characters" in a single work (xxv). At 800 pages, the result can only be described as epic. In fact, the original title for the book, appearing in all UK editions, reads: "A World on Fire: An Epic History of Two Nations Divided." It was not until publication in the United States, led by Random House, that the subtitle changed to: "Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War." While some critics have questioned whether England's non-intervention into the war qualifies as "crucial" (a criticism best pointed to Random House, not Foreman) no one can challenge the fact that her work is "epic"—and masterfully done, at that.

Foreman crafts each historical figure with dramatic flair. She begins with a description of Lord Napier, senior British diplomat in the United States who is replaced by Lord Lyons shortly before the start of the Civil War. Foreman illustrates Napier's social success in Washington as easily as she depicts Lyons' desperate awkwardness—giving us not two diplomats but two characters embroiled in American politics. Lord Lyons, she writes, "was neither a Mr. Bingley nor a Mr. Darcy" (12), and he failed to exude either the charm or mystery necessary to endear himself to Washington society. The opening chapters feature similar portraits of Lord Palmerston, William Seward, Charles Francis Adams, and William Howard Russell—all of whom merit introduction given their prevalence throughout the narrative. Working with a central cast of characters, and bringing these historical figures to life, Foreman's text stands out amid other Civil War histories because it captures the fundamentally human element of this military drama.

In terms of its scholarship, *A World on Fire* is both traditional (it covers all of the major battles) and refreshingly unique (it re-casts these events from a Euro-centric point of view). Foreman highlights, for example, Britain's policy of neutrality and the 1819 Foreign Enlistment Act, according to which British subjects were prohibited from volunteering for a foreign war. Many Britons ignored this prohibition and enlisted in the Union and Confederate forces, and British reporters including William Howard Russell and Frank Vizetelly reported their activities—along with the major events of the war—for an eager European audience. Major events such as the Emancipation Proclamation are recast for their significance in spurring British support for the North, and the southern blockades emerge less as a problem for Confederates than as a devastating blow to the British economy. Foreman reframes, then, the very center of the fighting and claims that it lingered somewhere in the mid-Atlantic.

Despite its policy of neutrality, Britain persistently flirted with military involvement in America's Civil War. In 1861, an overzealous Union naval Captain, Charles Wilkes, overtook the British steamer *RMS Trent* and captured its passengers: John Mason and John Slidell, new Confederate commissioners to Europe. Infuriated at this violation of British neutrality, the Prime Minister threatened military action. The issue came to a head on Christmas Day, when Seward finally issued an official statement disavowing Wilkes' actions and relieving the President of any involvement. Although no fighting ensued, Foreman asks: "What if the British lion roared back?" (180)

Foreman covers other near-catastrophes in which England came to the brink of war. In 1862, tensions heightened when England's shipyards became a site for building southern war ships. That summer also brought a "cotton famine" to England, nearly forcing Britain and France to recognize the Confederacy in order to end the blockade of southern ports. Foreman reminds readers that "80 percent of Britain's cotton supply came from America" (9), a trade worth more than \$600 million each year. With 700,000 English workers living off charity in 1862, Britons were desperate for a change. Nevertheless, Seward's posturing and the disposition of the British cabinet swayed the vote—once more—for neutrality.

Covering everything from Shiloh to Gettysburg, blockade running to female spies, *A World on Fire* offers its readers a complete history of the war. Foreman details every major battle, complete with maps, and provides insight into military leaders along the way. For example, she describes the friendship that blossomed between Grant and Sherman as they struggled with alcoholism and mental health,

respectively. Peppered with *Punch* cartoons and numerous sketches by Vizetelly, her history is alive and vivid—and certainly a fresh take on well-trod events.

I remain uncertain, however, how this book will fit alongside more academic studies of the war. As Gary Gallagher, writing for the *Washington Post*, notes: Foreman is “unconcerned with arcane scholarly debates” and writes for “an audience of non-specialists.” Yet it is precisely these “arcane” debates that continue to drive “specialists” as they conduct research. I think Foreman misses a crucial opportunity to *argue* her point and to engage in scholarly debates about the limits and confines of the war, particularly in terms of its international scope. Who are the authentic players in the war? How many sides structured this conflict? To what extent do we value international players in a domestic struggle? With a mass of data behind her, Foreman might have offered a more robust thesis in defense of Britain’s “crucial” role in the war, re-defining the war itself in the process.

Finally, I will note that Foreman does not compose a history from the “ground up.” Lincoln, Seward, Palmerston, Russell, Grant, and Sherman lead the action while anecdotes about Rose Greenhow and Belle Boyd—or descriptions of black troops—appear as side notes rather than feature stories. To her credit, Foreman covers an immense amount of territory. I simply wonder if she might have chosen a different landscape, given the vast number of English, Irish, German, and other European soldiers who fought in America’s rank and file. Nevertheless, her website offers to the public a seventy-one-page bibliography containing all of her primary sources. With such a generous archive, one can only imagine how many scholars will be inspired to pick up where she left off, bringing this popular study into the “arcane” field of academia.

***Eagles and Empire: The United States, Mexico, and the Struggle for a Continent.*** David A. Clary. New York: Bantam Books, 2009, \$30.00, cloth, 624 pp.

***Reviewed by Robert Wettemann, United States Air Force Academy***

Traditional scholarly treatments of the Mexican-American War limit their coverage to the 1846-48 conflict between the United States and the Republic of Mexico that concluded with the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and added over 500,000 square miles of territory to the United States. In *Eagles and Empire: The*

*United States, Mexico and the Struggle for a Continent*, former Chief Historian of the U.S. Forest Service David A. Clary, joins a growing trend in scholarship that expands the causation, scope and consequences of the conflict in a broader examination of the Mexican-American War, offering a sweeping narrative that begins in 1783, and centers around the conflict as it transpired between 1846 and 1848, with after-effects that linger into the present. Seeking to overcome the “lopsidedness” of previous accounts (454), Clary effectively places the struggle for the American southwest in a larger context of extended relations between Spain, Mexico, and the United States, significantly expanding the chronological scope of the conflict with a broad synthesis that follows the Mexican Golden Eagle and the American Bald Eagle as they sought dominion over territory in North America.

Clary divides his narrative into three parts, emphasizing the initial conflict over Texas, the attempted settlement of associated territorial claims in the Mexican-American War, and the lasting implications of the war in the region. In the first and largest section, entitled “La Guerra de Tejas” (The Texas War, 1783-1847), the author traces the origins of this clash over the southwest, and explains how tension emerged over the provinces of Texas and Coahuila emerged. In 1783, the United States gained its independence from Great Britain and over time came to embrace expansionism as “a phenomenon, not a policy” (452), looking towards the Rio Grande as the boundary between the two countries as early as the administration of Thomas Jefferson. Mexico, its neighbor to the south, secured its autonomy from Spain in 1821 and struggled to create its own national identity, at the same time looking to a territorially ill-defined Texas as a buffer between the two nations.

Over the course of the next five decades, forces from the two sides repeatedly crossed the Nueces and the Rio Grande rivers, with both sides seeking either political or military methods to secure control over the disputed region. Ascending to the Mexican Presidency in 1833 for the first of an eventual eleven non-consecutive terms, conservative Antonio de Lopez de Santa Anna repeatedly used Texas as a political issue to alternatively seize or hold power from more liberal political interests in Mexico. Despite repeated failure, the Mexican people repeatedly embraced the *caudillo*’s plans for either the reconquest of Texas or the expulsion of the *norteamericanos* from Mexican soil, looking to him as a savior for the Mexican people. His pattern of failure, exile, and return, repeated in the Texas Revolution, during the decade of Texian independence, and again in the first year of the Mexican War was closely linked with defining Mexico, and with it, Clary argues, Mexican nationalism.

The second section of Clary's narrative, "La Guerre de 47" (The War of '47) begins with Winfield Scott's invasion of Veracruz, and follows the American campaigns to secure northern Mexico for the United States. Clary's claims for balance notwithstanding, he adopts a sympathetic tone for the Mexican people, and the narrative descends into a repeated pattern of abuse, violence and depredation committed on the part of U.S. troops (although Santa Anna's decisions not to spare Texans at the Alamo and Goliad do not seem to face the same critical eye) as they marched overland from Veracruz to seize Mexico City. The section ends not with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, by which the United States received the Mexican Cession, but instead in 1855, after the Gadsden Purchase and a bi-national boundary commission finalized a border, apparently setting to rest territorial differences between the two nations.

Clary's final section, entitled "Reforms and Interventions," follows the legacy of the conflict. The shortest of the three sections, only twenty pages long, begins with Santa Anna's final exile in 1855 and continues until the publication of Clary's book in 2008. In it, he lays the burden of Mexico's contemporary problems, be it labor problems, illegal immigration, economic inequality, at the feet of the United States, contending that the struggle for the continent did not start in 1846 and did not end in 1848. This section is the weakest of the three, as he admits in his notes that "citations will be limited," an admission that is somewhat of a disappointment based upon the impressive work done elsewhere.

Clary is certainly the beneficiary of a broad range of new research in the subject generated by the recent sesquicentennial of the Mexican-American. Conspicuous, however, in their absence from his impressive bibliography are Stephen L. Hardin's *Texian Iliad: A Military History of the Texas Revolution* (University of Texas Press, 1994), and Timothy Johnson's *A Gallant Little Army: The Mexico City Campaign* (University Press of Kansas, 2007), both of which would seem to have provided some balance to his otherwise cogent, albeit somewhat lopsided analysis. Perhaps in an attempt to correct the swing of the pendulum, David A. Clary went a bit too far. This fault notwithstanding, *Eagles and Empire* provides a new look at the decades-long conflict between the United States and Mexico that is certainly worth reading, if not for simply a broader perspective on the conflict.

*Dog Company: The Boys of Pointe Du Hoc.* Patrick O'Donnell. New York: DeCapo Press, 2012, \$26.00, cloth, 305 pp.

*Reviewed by Robert Wettemann, United States Air Force Academy*

In May 1944, Lieutenant Colonel James Earl Rudder, commander of the Second Ranger Battalion received orders to lead his unit in what was perhaps the “most dangerous mission of D-Day”—scale the ninety-foot cliffs of Pointe du Hoc and neutralize six 155 mm., long-range artillery pieces believed to be sighted down the Normandy invasion beaches. On 6 June 1944, the men of D Company, “Dog Company,” joined by other elements of the Second Ranger Battalion, stormed the beaches, dodged bullets and returned fire while climbing to the top of the escarpment, only to discover that the fortifications were empty. In *Dog Company*, acclaimed author and military historian Patrick O'Donnell chronicles the World War II epic of an intrepid band of highly trained and specialized soldiers who not only completed this mission, but, in serving from Normandy to the end of the war, redefined bravery and heroism while forging a unique soldiers' bond that would endure for the rest of their lives.

When mustered at Fort Meade, Maryland, the men of Dog Company were a “ragtag orphan mob, with no military bearing or discipline” (16). Over the course of the next year, intensive training under the watchful eye of Texas A&M College graduate and former high school football coach James “Big Jim” Rudder formed them into a unit poised to “lead the way” in the Normandy invasion. Trained in teambuilding, an intensely personal brand of close-quarters combat known as “Rangerism,” demolitions and small arms, subjected to physical training, and encouraged to think critically, the men of Dog Company formed a connection that instilled within them the belief that “they were better than any combat soldiers in the world,” a trait they were given ample opportunity to repeatedly demonstrate from D-Day through to the end of World War II.

O'Donnell repeatedly recounts, with literary flair, how Dog Company repeatedly distinguished itself in some of the most difficult fighting of the war. After locating and destroying the German guns in an apple orchard one thousand yards behind the Normandy beaches, First Sergeant Leonard Lomell and the members of the company who survived the climb held a key road junction for two and a half days, effectively cutting German communication between Omaha and Utah Beach. After a five-week respite, they joined the rest of Second and Fifth Ranger Battalions as part of the VIII Corps in seizing the French port city of Brest. There, the

“Fabulous Four”—Lieutenant Bob Edlin joined by Sergeants William Courtney, William Dreher and Warren Burmaster—used deception and guile to capture a key fortification that protected the city. When Edlin found himself inside Lochrist battery facing a German officer reluctant to surrender his eight-hundred-man garrison, the intrepid ranger shoved a pinless grenade between the German’s legs until the recalcitrant colonel changed his mind.

Turning westward, Dog Company left a comparable path of bravado and mayhem as they joined in the liberation of Europe. On the third anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor, the company made one of a handful of bayonet charges during World War II, as a “wave of shooting, screaming Rangers” drove German troops off Hill 400 during the Battle of Hürtgen Forest. Digging in, the outnumbered Rangers used a shifting, elastic defense and managed to hold off determined counterattacks for almost forty hours, inspired by the actions of men like Private Edward Secor, who, when a German round destroyed his BAR, held off a company of German troops with a pair of captured German machine pistols, fired them until out of ammunition, before pulling his pistol and driving the enemy back down the hill.

Withdrawn from Hill 400, the handful of original members of the company quickly found themselves shoved back into action holding into the line at Simmerath during the Battle of the Bulge. Their demonstrations of bravery continued, as was the case when a grenade blew off replacement Private First Class Neil H. Shira’s hand. Despite exposed bones and considerable blood loss, he simply braced his M1 on the edge of the foxhole, and kept firing his weapon at the enemy until relieved. Crossing the Rhine brought their campaign in Europe to an end, but even the End of WWII did not halt the brave exploits of Dog Company, for in June 1984, sixty-something former Ranger Herman Stein returned to Normandy, joining a dozen Ranger-qualified Green Berets in a reenactment of the climb up Pointe Du Hoc had made fifty years earlier on D-Day.

With dramatic stories like these with which to work, it is easy to see how Patrick O’Donnell conceived a project like *Dog Company*. His stirring narrative represents an outgrowth of his “Drop Zone” World War II oral history project that he initiated in 1995 which now contains more than four thousand World War II oral history interviews ([www.TheDropZone.org](http://www.TheDropZone.org)). In the process, O’Donnell established a relationship with Leonard Lomell, who served in Dog Company as its First Sergeant and later became the first enlisted Ranger of the Second Battalion to receive a battlefield commission to lieutenant. Serving with the company from its initial organization until wounded in the Hürtgen Forest, Lomell’s interviews formed the foundation for O’Donnell’s narrative. This personal connection

allowed the author to meet other members of the company, and he seamlessly blended these rich and intensely personal narratives into an exceptional account of World War II bravery and courage. Although the United States had many heroes in World War II, Patrick O'Donnell's account of the exploits of Dog Company clearly place these men in the vanguard.

***The Marne, 1914: The Opening of World War I and the Battle that Changed the World.*** Holger Herwig. New York: Random House, 2009, \$28.00, cloth, 391 pp.

***Reviewed by Mark E. Grotelueschen, United States Air Force Academy***

Eloquently written, balanced in its judgments, and sound in its conclusions, this detailed examination of the Great War's opening campaigns on the Western Front is a work of operational military history at its very best. It is now, and will likely remain for some time, the most complete and authoritative study of the monumental battles of August and September, 1914, that determined the fate of at least Western Europe, and probably much of the world it then controlled. Of particular note, Herwig has produced a superb example of that most rare kind of history—one that equally satisfies the professional scholar and the general reader.

The author, a professor of history and strategic studies at the University of Calgary, is arguably North America's most prominent scholar of Imperial German military and naval history. Intimately familiar with the extant historiography on the subject, he also has accomplished truly groundbreaking archival work—accessing records from across the various German kingdoms (e.g., Bavaria, Saxony, Prussia, etc.) that contributed field armies to this massive campaign. He also mined a collection of crucial documents thought to have been destroyed by Allied bombing in World War II, but that was later discovered in Russia and returned to Germany as the Cold War was drawing to a close.

*The Marne, 1914*, excels at providing the breadth of context necessary for a thorough and fair treatment of the topic. Herwig begins by discussing the road to war for Imperial Germany, and offers readers the conclusions of a senior scholar who has spent a lifetime studying the key figures and armed forces of Imperial Germany. For Herwig, Germany's decision for war in 1914 was neither part of a conspiracy hatched in 1912, nor was it a "grab for world power" as Fritz Fischer claimed in 1961 (10). Rather, facing a bad and deteriorating strategic situation,

German leaders, almost uniformly in agreement that a war was coming sooner or later, concluded it was better to go to war in 1914 than at some unknown point in the near future. Herwig discusses the various belligerents' mobilization plans and weighs in on a recent debate about the very existence of the famous "Schlieffen Plan." Without getting bogged down in terminology, he shows that most leaders in the German Army had no doubt that when war came, they would wage it using the "operational concept devised" by Count Alfred von Schlieffen in 1905 (xii). But he also shows the many ways that Helmuth von Moltke (the Younger), Chief of the German General Staff, altered the plan (in some ways for the better and in others for the worse)—and so Herwig generally refers to the final version as the Schlieffen-Moltke Plan.

But this is first and foremost a narrative history of one of the modern world's greatest and most influential campaigns, and the author does a superb job of giving all sides appropriate attention—French, Belgian, and British, as well as German. Herwig properly connects the Battle of the Marne with the widespread series of engagements that preceded it—often referred to as the Battle of the Frontiers. The latter was not just a German victory, but very nearly a French catastrophe. Herwig's explanation of the extraordinary developments that enabled the French to overcome their initial disasters, reorganize and re-motivate themselves, and deal the German army a stunning reverse at the Marne is perhaps the most interesting story of the book. One point worth noting is that, almost without question, this battle pitted the world's two most professional and powerful armies against each other. And yet, these campaigns were filled with errors and blunders on all sides, and from top to bottom. Though Herwig's operational focus generally rests on the field armies and corps, he discusses both the senior headquarters above, as well as the divisions, battalions, regiments, companies, and at times, even individual soldiers, below, to show how massively complicated and regularly chaotic warfare was, and often still is. From the tremendous failings of both the German and French high commands, to countless cases of friendly troops shooting at each other or breaking in panic, he demonstrates the truth of Clemenceau's dictum that "war is a series of catastrophes that results in a victory" (225). The statistics of these opening engagements bear this out. In just about six weeks, the two sides suffered approximately a million casualties (killed, wounded, or missing)—a rate that surpasses the more famous horrors of the Somme, Verdun, and Passchendaele.

So how did the French (with just a little British help) turn the disaster of the Frontiers into the miracle of the Marne? The answer is complicated, but a few conclusions are worth relating. First, for all his many faults and mistakes, France's

Marshal Joseph Joffre clearly outgeneraled Moltke in the run-up to and execution of the Battle of the Marne. Second, the troops of the French Army confounded their opponents with their resiliency and determination. Finally, despite the modern assumption of German institutional military superiority, Herwig shows that the Germany army of 1914 suffered from “a flawed command structure, an inadequate logistical system, an antiquated communications arm, and inept field commanders” (xviii). The French were not much better—at times they were worse—but by early September, after German units had marched hundreds of kilometers in sweltering heat since early August, fighting repeated engagements for days at a time, the margins for error became unbearably small for the German forces. They were attempting strategic and operational maneuvers that were so audacious (especially in a logistical sense) that they needed to be executed with near perfection in order to succeed. In addition to the institutional weaknesses stated above, poor decisions and weak leadership by Moltke, some of his field army commanders (especially General Karl von Bülow, head of Second Army), and even by relatively junior staff officers (such as Lieutenant Colonel Richard Hentsch), led to the German Army’s failure to complete the campaign its senior leaders knew it desperately needed to win.

General readers and scholars alike will not only enjoy this impressive work, but they may find themselves sharing this reviewer’s hope that Herwig will turn his attention to some of the other significant campaigns in the Great War that would benefit from this extraordinarily detailed study, particularly the Battle of Verdun in 1916 and the Spring Offensives of 1918.

***The Stick Soldiers.*** Hugh Martin. Rochester, New York: BOA Editions, 2013. \$16.00, paper, 104 pp.

***Reviewed by M. K. Sukach, United States Air Force Academy***

Hugh Martin’s *The Stick Soldiers* is an approachable, necessary volume of poems about what it was like to prepare for war, serve in Iraq, and return to Ohio

a body

much less

without the plated-vest, the ammo

pouches full, overflowing.

This self-reflective moment is followed after a pause by the most pedestrian of moments when a “waiter suggests the salmon.” That line almost seems to disappear in its own prosaic, strange weightlessness. However, it is because of the line’s utter absence of significance that allows Martin to marry the image of a waiter suggesting a fish to the realization that the speaker is somehow “less” and vulnerable to the ordinary, the mundane now turned distressingly incongruous and irrelevant. That level of precision is a sign of a keenly observant, thoughtful poet who makes purposeful choices. Martin pays attention to soldiers, the utter tedium and absolute deadliness of war, tattooed psalms, “IED, RPG, / small arms, / car bomb-- / things to be avoided.” In a world we might only imagine, we shouldn’t have poems about war. It is embarrassing to admit we’re not better than what we are. But, given the world as we’ve chosen to make it, Martin’s poems are unfortunately not the last volume of war poetry we need written for a wider public discourse. To that end, Martin’s poems are a sign that we still understand our humanity even if we do not necessarily privilege it above our proclivity for war. The former Poet Laureate, Ted Kooser, noted that much of the poetry to emerge immediately following September 11, 2001, even from “our most accomplished poets, wasn’t very compelling, mostly because it was based upon the nation’s common, collective, *general* experiences of that day” (Kooser 94). Kooser makes a cogent point about the dearth of that generalized experience but he was getting at the importance of paying attention to the world in a way that doesn’t collapse into solipsistic, confessional poetry—a poetry which does little more than exploit particular details only to climax in some epiphanic moment the poet was having. Kooser praises and encourages poets to practice careful, “impersonal observation” (97), what he calls spying. Although a good many of the poems in Martin’s book are voiced in the first person, all of the poems are profoundly observant. According to Kooser, a spy should “record...avoid calling attention to himself,” assess what he’s observed, and report to his employer (97). Martin’s poems showcase his talent for this level of examination. These poems reveal Iraq in all its real and imagined dangers in a language that is somber, angry, deeply reflective, but also intensely, if not darkly humorous.

A sonnet Kooser might call an “I” poem, “M-16A2 Assault Rifle,” the quintessential image of war, in many ways sums up the entire collection and complements the last, much longer, poem in the book, “Nostos: Quinn’s Bar, Cleveland Heights.” The sonnet falls outside the six chapters into which the book

is organized and, despite what its title states, presents two instruments of war: the weapon and the soldier. The speaker confesses that after such careful cleaning

it'd be wrong  
to shoot again, to smear and smudge with whorls  
to blemish a thing that makes the night blush

This is the other instrument of war who ironically praises and beautifies an instrument of death, his assault rifle, "so it shines." Although these poems are not overtly political, this image reminds us of what is "wrong" with the business of sending men and women to war, particularly our war in Iraq, for reasons we rationalize but can never justify. The relationship between the soldier and his weapon is disturbing; yet it is the soldier's necessary devotion to his rifle, "a cold slice of darkness in grease-stained hands," that allows him to take the life of his enemy, protect himself and his comrades. This poem, serving as the book's second epigraph, is characteristic of what we find in most if not all of Martin's poems: a troubled, ironic sense of intimacy pitted against a necessary sense of detachment, neither of which is successfully, fully achieved by the soldiers in these poems.

One might expect so-called war poets from at least the last two decades to exhibit more lyrically associative (and dissociative) and experimental tendencies. A great deal of contemporary sentiment in the poetry community condemns narrative as a mere and myopic choreography of cause and effect, which in its claustrophobic way assumes what is contained, for example, in a narrative poem is in fact the whole story. If our glossary of the non-narrative form consisted of the following words, one would be hard pressed to distinguish whether we were talking about modern lyrical poetry or war. The list: fracturing, fragmented, decentering, obliquity, absurdist, asymmetrical, aleatory, simultaneity, instability, reflexivity, elusivity, and so on. To be certain, this is not to belittle the modern lyric, but its language is not about closure or resolution. It makes some sense, then, that the men and women subjected to war would gravitate to narrative as a means of structuring their experience rather than by redisplaying it in what we might call a kind of accidental lyric or improvisational poetry. Citing Adonis's translation of "A Mirror for the Twentieth Century," by Khaled Mattawa, Carolyn Forché concludes that "our age lacks the structure of a story. Or perhaps it would be closer to Adonis's poem to say that narrative implies progress and completion. The history of our time does not allow for any of the bromides of progress, nor for the promise of successful closure" (43). While it is difficult to disagree with Forché's view, Martin's book

represents at least the attempt to narratively structure his experience of war—wars which all begin, develop, and eventually end; yet for the soldier are too often never a “structured” experience and for some may begin and develop, but never end. I think we are always trying to tell stories. In the book’s eponymous poem, “The Stick Soldiers,” the story told “In blue crayon” demonstrates how we begin telling our stories as children. No one “recovers” after reading or writing poems, but being involved as writers and readers with the story of our experience, particularly of war, promotes recovery and the idea that war is a useless, debilitating part of our lives.

The first stick figures were drawn to tell stories. Reminiscent of pre-historic linguistic symbols, Martin’s “stick soldiers” recall not just our own third-grade attempts to draw the world as best we could, but reveals an immanent historical proclivity toward war and the unfortunate compulsion to establish dominion and hegemony. These figures are at once immobile, sketched as they are on their respective mediums, but also represent freedom or portability (perhaps the mobility of art) as the image/sign can be moved, drawn anywhere, “in white chalk” on any “concrete walls.” As signs, warning or otherwise, the almost generic figures demonstrate the cultural generalization and homogenized perception the public has of soldiers, drawn in the most basic geometry. The enemy is at least identified by “the red cloth wrapped over faces, / *Iraki* written / across stick chests.” The implied misnomer achieved by misspelling Iraqi reveals another way in which we admit our ignorance through a dangerous, indiscriminate view of Iraqis— as if all Iraqis are the enemy. This lack of understanding is also underscored by the overture the poem makes to religion and the children celebrating their Christian holiday by sending cards listing what they “want for Christmas” to soldiers in the field. This idea playfully marks ignorance as innocence but ends with the image of “children” being targeted by a “stick man” with an “RPG.” Stick figures are the simplest of images, yet this poem presents the complexity of a war in which it was not often easy to tell where danger was, who or where the enemy might have been, which side was perceived to be good, which evil. Note how Martin incorporates the real Humvee (in the crossfire) into the scene depicted on the wall and how well he brings the story full circle to remind us of the real consequences of war:

A stick soldier holds a machine gun;  
he waves at us,  
us, in the Humvees

Further down the wall, a stick man holds

an RPG  
aimed toward the Humvee,  
the waving soldier's head—  
what the children want for Christmas  
or just what they want.

For those of us who serve, most of our recent wars and conflicts remain all too familiar despite the hyperbole with which they are too often declared and subsequently rendered unrecognizable by elected officials and the media who purport to keep the general public informed. I'm not proud or ashamed for serving three tours in support of Operations Iraqi and Enduring Freedom. I'm struck with an admittedly execrable bitterness, not necessarily against those who haven't fought with us in any of our wars over the past 11 years, but that our stories are not changing. Nor is the citizenry—here or in Iraq, which to this day continues to collapse under the weight of increasing violence. We need a better public address or redress because we shouldn't need to write or write about war literature. Caroline Forché says that “the poetry of witness” constitutes a reclamation of the “social from the political” (45). This aptly describes Martin's poems, which at least bring us closer to understanding the soldiers and the wars they fought and continue to fight.

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