

[Folse on Lamay Licursi, 'Remembering World War I in America'](#)

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Kimberly J. Lamay Licursi. *Remembering World War I in America*. Studies in War, Society, and the Military Series. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018. 294 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-9085-3.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

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Kimberly J. Lamay Licursi's *Remembering World War I in America* is a welcome addition to the growing scholarship on memory of the Great War. She joins the ranks of Steven Trout's *On the Battlefield of Memory: The First World War and American Remembrance, 1919-1941* (2010) and Lisa Budreau's *Bodies of War: World War I and the Politics of Commemoration in America, 1919-1933* (2010) in illuminating why World War I failed to elicit a consistent and unified memory within popular American culture the way the Civil War and World War II did. Based on her examination of state war histories, combat memoirs, war novels, and motion pictures, Licursi argues that the collective memory of World War I suffered from Americans' conflicting understandings of the war's larger meaning. Most Americans, she asserts, either saw the war as a patriotic crusade or a tragic waste of men and resources. This failure to agree on the war's legacy, mixed with a strong undercurrent of apathy, precluded the formation of a consistent memory in popular culture in the 1920s and beyond. Instead of commemorating the veterans' sacrifices in the Great War, Americans chose instead to simply put the war behind them.

Efforts from state governments to produce comprehensive war histories usually resulted in one of several outcomes that ranged from projects never getting off the ground to those that fell short of their aims. Based on research from the state archives in New York, Virginia, and Kansas, Licursi asserts that some communities never put much effort into their projects. Researchers encountered people, including veterans themselves, who took umbrage at government-led efforts to commemorate the war in the first place. Many people did not cooperate and either ignored or chose not to provide information. Numerous communities published some sort of commemorative volume but very few could gather enough information from local veterans and their families to create comprehensive lists of those who served. She concludes that apathy is the culprit here. "The experiences in New York, Virginia, and Kansas," Licursi argues, "establish a pattern of behavior that demonstrates a pervasive apathy, if not disdain, for war remembrance in postwar America" (p. 5).

In her chapter on war memoirs, Licursi contends that even though veterans of the Great War published hundreds of books about their experiences, the public largely ignored their work. Despite often being compelling and well-written works, many veterans' war memoirs became victims of postwar Americans' disinterestedness. Albertus Catlin's *With the Help of God and Few Marines* (1919) and Hervey Allen's *Toward the Flame* (1926) received good reviews but sales for both were

very low compared to other more popular genres, such as Western novels. The literature itself, however, reflected many Americans' views of the war in that most memoirs were saturated with themes of patriotism and glory or unnecessary slaughter. For example, Catlin had a much more positive view of the war than Allen who is associated with being anti-war. Bereft of any consensus, "Biographical war writing was simply not engaged with on any level by most Americans during the interwar years" (p. 90). Within a generation, the voices of America's Great War veterans would be drowned out by a new, larger war.

This discord over the war's meaning pervaded war-related fiction as well. The war either "wrecked an entire generation of American youth or made them stronger as they passed through its trials" (p. 146). Booth Tarkington's *Ramsey Milholland* (1919) and Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) tended to romanticize the war in varying degrees. Willa Cather's *One of Ours* (1922), whose protagonist found courage, confidence, and even redemption in battle, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1923. Other books, such as John Dos Passos's *Three Soldiers* (1921), Thomas Boyd's *Through the Wheat* (1923), and William March's *Company K* (1933), were devoid of romanticism and glorification of war. Battle and killing had no rejuvenating effects for American youth, according to these authors. On the contrary, war brutalized and dehumanized them. Licursi argues that the relatively weak sales of *all* these books around their release further reveals the apathetic attitudes people had toward the war. Rather than argue over its meaning, "Americans were content to agree to disagree about the war and put the whole affair behind them," Licursi concludes (p. 146).

Motion pictures probably had the most potential to instill a consistent and popular collective memory of the Great War, but they also failed in this regard. Licursi analyzes the top-grossing movies (based on ticket sales) of the interwar period, such as *Sergeant York* (1941), *What Price Glory* (1926), and *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921). Unlike war-related fiction or combat memoirs, which often came across as either anti-war *or* overly romantic, movies about the Great War veered into both realms. In movies one could find scenes of tragedy, death, and destruction while also seeing more wholesome elements of patriotism, comedic relief, and friendship. As a result, audiences could find themes in movies that validated their point of view. Hollywood tried to appeal to as many viewers as possible. "This is probably why ... the message about war in many films was malleable," Licursi suggests. "War could be presented as patriotic, adventurous, and tragic all at the same time" (p. 149). The dichotomous nature of these films, however, attenuated their ability to foster a collective understanding and memory of the war in American minds. The opposing views on the war remained unreconciled.

There are a few points of contention that bear mentioning. A book about war and memory should be more exact regarding military/historical information, but Licursi's handling of the basic military command structure is clumsy at times. For example, she claims that Colonel Albertus Catlin was the commanding officer at Belleau Wood, when, in fact, it was Army Brigadier General James G. Harbord (p. 60). Then, it appears she confuses two separate branches of service. To support her claim that the US Army loved King Vidor's *The Big Parade* (1925), Licursi provides a quotation from a 1974 issue of the *New York Times* that reads "the marines 'had more recruits after that picture than they'd had since World War I'" (p. 160). How marine recruiting proves the army liked the movie is not clear to me. These instances are sloppy but minor and do not detract from the greater value of the book, however.

Licursi succeeds in recounting why the Great War failed to garner the commemorative efforts and the cohesion of popular memory that exists in other larger American wars. But, more than that, and this is the book's greatest value, she uncovers a glimpse of how Americans *felt* about the war. It is important to remember that Americans were never of one mind about fighting the Germans in 1917. Popular opinion swung incrementally toward war with the sinking of the *Lusitania* and the Zimmerman Telegram. By war's declaration, George Creel's Committee of Public Information whipped up even more popular support for the conflict. But there remained a significant portion of the population that believed war to be tragic and wasteful. These Americans balked at pro-war claims that war would rejuvenate American manhood, arguing instead the opposite view. Licursi demonstrates how, after the armistice, public opinion about the war swung back their direction. Her analysis of state histories, memoirs, and fiction reveals the effects of this swing.

Licursi adds not only to the growing scholarship of World War I memory but also to larger works on the war itself and the Progressive Era, such as David M. Kennedy's *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (1980), Robert H. Zieger's *America's Great War: World War I and the American Experience* (2000), Jackson Lears's *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (2009), and Michael McGerr's *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (2003). Licursi demonstrates that the Americans written about in these books, both veterans and civilians, many of whom were swept up by the Progressives' appeals to national honor and promises of the rejuvenating powers of war, became disenchanted about a conflict that did not live up to its description as a crusade. This is reason enough for scholars interested in the impact of the Great War on American history to become familiar with this book.

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