

Jonathan Clode & John Stuart Clarke (eds.), *To End All Wars: The Graphic Anthology of the First World War*. London: Soaring Penguin Press, 2014. ISBN: 978-1-908030-13-9. 328 pages.

2014 saw the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War (1914-18), a war in which 37 million soldiers, sailors and airmen were killed, 20 million wounded, as well as 7 million civilians dying, making it one of the most catastrophic global conflicts in human history. It was fought between the so-called Triple Entente of Britain, France and Russia and the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy. Later in the war Japan and the United States also joined in on the side of the Triple Entente. It was in essence an imperialist war fought between both old and newer colonial powers that sought to carve up the rest of the world between them. It was also claimed to be “the war to end all wars”.

In many of last year’s commemorative documentaries, media events and newspaper reports in Britain to mark the centenary, one of the recurring revisionist themes was of it being a just war and the death of so many millions of people a noble and necessary sacrifice in defence of western democracy, freedom and culture. This rewriting of history not only sought to give credence to the idea of the unavoidable “Great War”, but also to justify the wars that have followed on from this previous war to end all wars – the Second World War, Korean war, Vietnam war, Gulf wars, Balkan war, wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Ukraine and the latest never-ending war on terrorism. Time and time again it seems that those who refuse to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

A politically dissenting but still very accessible antidote to this recent historical recycling of the myth of the “good war” can be found in a new comic-book anthology of graphically illustrated First World War narratives, published by the charity Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders. A small part of the book price also goes to help this international, medical organisation provide emergency aid to people affected by armed conflict, epidemics, healthcare exclusion and natural disasters). The album contains 26 stories, written and drawn by 53 artists and writers from Britain, Ireland, Spain, Greece, Indonesia and the United States, each one dealing with a different aspect of the 1914-18 war. Using the innovative narrative techniques of modern graphic novels, the collection contains a visually immediate, politically challenging and dramatically effective combination of black-and-white cartoon illustrations and dialogue, which give a much-needed close-up view of the British, French, German and African soldiers, sailors, nurses, civilians, protagonists and antagonists, all of whom were involved in or affected by this global conflict.

The first story in the collection, “The Iron Dice”, written and illustrated by Brick, is an imaginary and cathartic account of an international war crimes tribunal where those who were responsible for starting the First World War are brought to trial in a court room filled with the anonymous dead and maimed who cry out for justice: Since “we were told war was inevitable”, then “history needs re-examining” (16), which is exactly what this new book tries to do. One such

alternative historical narrative, “The Coward’s War”, scripted by Jonathan Clode and drawn by Matt Soffe, is the story of Private Thomas Highgate, a farmer’s boy from England who enlists as a volunteer and who fights at the battle of the Marne, one of the bloodiest of the war in France, after which he runs away, is re-captured, then tried and shot for desertion. The concept of post-traumatic stress disorder did not exist at the time and soldiers who suffered from it were seen as either cowards or mentally insane, even though running away from such a barbaric slaughter would seem like a very sensible and natural reaction.

Another very important act of recovery of events that have been hidden from history and which are brought to light in this anthology is the contribution of African soldiers and labourers to the war effort. In “No More Than Cattle”, written by Colm Regan and illustrated by Mike-Lito, a teacher reminds a group of modern African students that “the British and German Armies used between 500,000 and 700,000 East African porters during World War One. Nearly half were killed” (239). He also tells of a rebellion of hundreds of plantation workers in Nyasaland (today’s Malawi), who refused to be conscripted into what they saw as a white man’s war. This anonymous uprising was put down with great brutality by the British, reprisals that clearly jarred with the claims in Europe at the time of a war fought in the name of freedom and democracy.

This is altogether a unique, thought-provoking and compelling collection of alternative First World War narratives, which all share an underlying pacifist message of unity and solidarity between peoples. As Pat Mills, himself the writer of *Charley’s War*, a ten volume anti-war graphic novel series, underscores in his introduction to the collection:

We really need more stories like these to enhance the spirit of reconciliation that should be the guiding light of this centenary, especially at a time when the German war dead on the Western Front are still *not* accorded the same burial rights as the Allied war dead. Death is not the great equalizer it should be, and it is sad but not surprising therefore that Germans do not visit their war dead in the same numbers as people from other countries. Currently, we are fed the spin-doctor’s version of legalized mass murder, legitimized as “heroic sacrifice” with challenging, embarrassing or difficult facts whitewashed from the record. I hope this collection will help to counteract their lies and commemorate the centenary as an opportunity for reconciliation and a search for the truth (10).

The last surviving British veteran soldier of World War One, Harry Patch, who died recently at the age of 111, described the conflict as “organized murder”. When asked what advice he would give to young people today, he replied: “Don’t join the army”. It is this same basic anti-war sentiment, without doubt unpopular in some official circles, to which this new anthology lends graphic support. Since it is directed mainly at younger readers, who need to get the real causes of and alternatives to war explained to them, this easily read, informative and yet engrossing collection of war stories should be made available in school libraries everywhere.

*Ronald Paul*