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The Veterans' Tale: British Military Memoirs of the Second World War. By Frances Houghton, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019, xi + 293 pp. £75 hardback. ISBN 9781108496919.

Autobiographical writing is often used to provide an insight into the human costs of conflict; first-person accounts can help historians to assess the impact of battle or to ascertain how far service personnel knew about overarching aims, actions and outcomes. But 'ego-documents' also raise broader questions about the cultural contexts which shape the meaning of war, both at the time and afterwards, and even the impact of conflict on selfhood itself.

Frances Houghton's vividly written and meticulously researched book *The Veterans' Tale* poses such ambitious questions, building on and extending points raised in Alex Vernon's *Arms and the Self* and Samuel Hynes' seminal book *The Soldiers' Tale*. Houghton's book offers a uniquely detailed study of published Second World War memoirs, comparing publications from across all three branches of the British military and across different European, Atlantic and North African theatres. It charts memoirs from the earliest publications in the early 1950s and into the 1960s when aspects of the war were subject to new criticism. It then explores publications coinciding with important anniversaries in the 1980s and 1990s and the gradual decline of publications by 2010. The monograph makes very effective use of the memoirs themselves, including many evocative examples, but also examines the archives of Leo Cooper, the military publishing house. For instance, in Chapter Two, Houghton uses this important archival collection to outline the painstaking process of research, writing and publication that many veterans undertook; in Chapter Eight, letters to the publisher reveal the reputational issues at stake when veterans chose to write their wartime memoirs. Throughout the book, the *power* of the memoir is evident, whether that be in assuaging individual guilt, explaining and educating future generations, or questioning or corroborating the historical record.

The monograph explores the variety of interpretative approaches and methods open to the historian of selfhood, experience and war. The introduction draws on memory studies and oral history methodology, as well as more psychologically-informed ideas about composure, self-fashioning and emotional equilibrium. This psychological function of memoirs comes to the fore in Chapter One where Houghton explores the various motivations for writing and publishing after war; the quest for personal psychological preparedness underpins both Chapter Four on writers' relationships with machines and weaponry and Chapter Five on killing and the enemy. In Chapter Six, Houghton puts the well-debated theory of the 'primary group' under the microscope, analysing the extent to which servicemen fought to defend their small group, their own 'band of brothers' (p.170). Houghton traces the process by which these servicemen became experienced fighters and then post-war veterans, using Chapter Seven to add an important addendum to Graham Dawson's seminal *Soldier Heroes* by highlighting the continuation of the glamorized image of military masculinity well into the Second World War.

However, it is in the final chapter that we come to understand what is truly at stake with a military memoir. One of Houghton's three case studies is *The Eighth Passenger*, Miles Tripp's memoir of life as an 'ordinary' bomb aimer in Bomber Command. Tripp's memoir contains a passage about aiming his bombs beyond the firestorm during a raid on Dresden, a statement which was alternately used by historians and campaigners to intervene in debates about the impact and morality of Bomber Command, including by the disgraced historian David Irving. As such debates reached their crescendo in the 1990s and early 2000s, memoirs like Tripp's reveal the wider cultural significance of first-person testimony in telling, re-telling and interpretation of the history of the Second World War.

This fascinating book contains much that will interest the historian of warfare, conflict and society. As well as offering an overview of military memoirs across a long period of time, it contains fascinating smaller-scale case studies, from *Henry V* reading groups in battle to the

habitual memoir 'foreword', usually written by an illustrious military figure. The book focuses purposefully on the experience of men who served 'at the sharp end' (p.9), rather than repeating the excellent recent work on POWs and FEPOWS. Whilst it dwells little on the specific cultural and social connotations of becoming a 'veteran' and the impact of this on later writing, the agency of veteran-writers is nevertheless carefully considered throughout. In an era of head-cams and social media, Houghton's book is an important contribution to the growing field of military selfhood and draws our attention to the analytical value of memoirs in writing the history of war.

University of Bristol

GRACE HUXFORD