



4-2019

Review of *Baptism of Fire: The Birth of the Modern British Fantastic in World War I*

Ian A. Isherwood
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/idsfac>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [European History Commons](#), and the [Military History Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Recommended Citation

Isherwood, Ian. Review of *Baptism of Fire: The Birth of the Modern British Fantastic in World War I* by Janet Brennan Croft (ed.). *Journal of Inklings Studies* 9, no. 1 (2019): 77-80.

This is the author's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/idsfac/31>

This open access review is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Review of Baptism of Fire: The Birth of the Modern British Fantastic in World War I

Abstract

The Great War had a lasting influence on literature and literary culture in Britain. Spanning the 'brows' of literary taste were authors writing in response to the cataclysmic violence experienced by the war generation, at both the war front and the home front. The war's shadow permeated all aspects of cultural expression; its experience found authors who, with varying degrees of success, wrote on its lasting influence to a readership that, as the decades wore on, grew increasingly afraid of another world war. One of the responses undoubtedly influenced by the war was the genre of fantasy. As one of the contributors to this volume, John Garrad, reminds us, both high modernism and epic fantasy 'are cast from the same source', each a response to the lingering shock of war (277). The fantastic was one of the many British cultural byproducts of the horrific violence experienced and perpetrated in France and Flanders. [excerpt]

Keywords

Great War, culture, writing, genre fantasy

Disciplines

English Language and Literature | European History | History | Military History

Janet Brennan Croft, ed. *Baptism of Fire: The Birth of the Modern British Fantastic in World War I*. 326 pp. Altadena, CA: Kent University Press, 2015. ISBN: 978-1887726030.

The Great War had a lasting influence on literature and literary culture in Britain. Spanning the ‘brows’ of literary taste were authors writing in response to the cataclysmic violence experienced by the war generation, both at the front and on the home fronts. The war’s shadow permeated all aspects of cultural expression; its experience found authors who, with varying degrees of success, wrote on its lasting influence to a readership that, as the decades wore on, grew increasingly afraid of another world war. One of the responses undoubtedly influenced by the war was the genre of fantasy, which as one of the authors in this volume, John Garrad, reminds us that both high modernism and epic fantasy ‘are cast from the same source’ both responses to the lingering individual and social shock of war (277). The fantastic was one of the many British cultural biproducts of the horrific violence experienced and perpetrated in France and Flanders.

Baptism of Fire is an edited collection of seventeen essays on the impact of the First World War on fantasy literature. In Janet Brennan Croft’s brief introduction, she acknowledges that this is an examination ‘of the fantastic response to World War I among British Authors. It is not meant to be an exhaustive collection by any means, but rather an initial exploration of the topic of fantasy as a reply to World War I in the hands of a limited group of authors’ (1). With these narrow perimeters set, the book succeeds along the lines of Croft’s intentions. Overall, it makes a compelling case that the war’s shadow can be not only found in the works of the iconic war poets, but also, in fantasy writers who reacted violence with a restored vision of heroic archaism that was anything but mere escapism. This volume offers both literary criticism and historical essays that attest to the seriousness of the fantasy genre as a foundational literary movement with lasting influence on British history.

The book is divided into two sections, each of which, perhaps, could have been their own volume with more contributions. The first half of the book considers the Inklings – authors in the literary circle of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis – while the second half pertains to authors outside of Oxbridge. Some of the material here will not be new to scholars within this field of Tolkien/Lewis studies: five of the essays within the collection are ‘classic’ articles from *Mythlore* while the other eight

essays are new works specific to this volume. Janet Brennan Croft has skillfully edited the essays so that they flow together and demonstrate a relatively wide perspective on the ways in which scholars can approach the genre of fantasy from multiple interdisciplinary perspectives. With *Baptism of Fire*, scholars have at easy reach challenging articles that will help guide their thinking about the First World War's impact upon fantasy authors of the war generation. Though the works of Tolkien and Lewis dominate the book (especially the former), one of the great utilities of this volume is examining the many methodological concepts in which each essay presents as intellectual food for thought upon both the period in question and the genre. Beyond anything else, the book is a mosaic of scholarly approaches.

The first half of *Baptism of Fire* pertains to J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. Six of the first nine chapters concern Tolkien's work as it relates to the First World War while only three pertain to Lewis (and one of these is a treatment of both authors). The final essay within this section is on Owen Barfield, the only contribution about another Inklings. Michael Livingston's essay 'The Shell-shocked Hobbit' and S. Brett Carver's 'Faromir and the Heroic Ideal of the Twentieth Century' are both articles from *Mythlore*, each interpreting what J.R.R. Tolkien may have witnessed on the Somme front into his legendarium. As such, both make broad assumptions about the experiences of the First World War, indicating directly and indirectly that Tolkien's world was one created in the shadow of war trauma and changing definitions of heroism. Other essays within this section offer variations on this theme. Margaret Sinex writes compellingly about men's bodies and interwar medical literature as a lens to understanding the physical and mental trauma of the war on Tolkien's fiction. Nora Alfaiz's essay continues the idea of the war's traumatic legacy with particular attention on historical memory in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* in her essay on (dis)remembering the past.

The aforementioned essays all share a similar convention about the fact that both the war and war trauma is something that is central Tolkien's works. Two other essays in this section divert from this idea by offering fresh contextual perspectives on the context of the war generation and its experiential narratives. Peter Grybauskas's essay on Gollum, the Great War, and the Lost Alliance, posits that *The Lord of the Rings* is not a war story per se, but instead a story about war stories (93). His emphasis on memory and interpretation is a novel way of approaching the books. Shandi Stevenson's wonderful essay on Tolkien and Lewis convincingly argues that both authors 'responded to the postwar disorientation by seeking to recreate a cohesive vision of history, but one without the linear orientation and the confident clarity that had characterized Enlightenment

political theory and its descendants' (111). Her essay frames each author's moralism as both a response to the war, but also, a means of understanding history – one that both rejected modernism and progressive historiography. Both of these essays are welcome additions and add significant variation on reading Tolkien and Lewis's works.

Two essays within this collection specifically address C.S. Lewis's war experiences. War trauma is, again, the lens by which each scholar uses to view his work. Andrew Krokstrom argues, somewhat heavy-handedly, that Lewis was intentionally misleading about the lingering psychological effects of the war due to emotional repression and the social stigma of mental illness. Brian Melton's essay 'The Great War and Narnia' takes a more measured approach towards what we do know (and what we do not know) about Lewis's war experiences and insightfully dissects assumed trauma before then arguing that Lewis was clearly affected by the war, but that combat on the western front itself did not dominate his later works. The final essay in the first section of *Baptism of Fire* is Tiffany Brooke Martin's 'Horses Horoscopes, and Human Consciousness: Owen Barfield on Making Meaning in His Post-WWI Writings'. This is a fine essay on Barfield, but one that rests a bit awkwardly in a book section devoted entirely to Lewis and Tolkien. Still, it is a welcome contribution that introduces another voice from the Inklings to the conversation on the war's legacy.

The second section of *Baptism of Fire* relates to the genre of fantasy literature as it is defined more broadly during the interwar period. The essays here are not bound by a central theme or author, but instead offer variations on fantasy written outside of the limited world of the Inklings. Nick Milne begins the section with an essay on alternative historical writing that is both informative and exceptionally well-researched on this minor but important genre. Of all the essays in the collection, Milne's engages the most with an interdisciplinary exploration of the war's context within the changing historiography within First World War studies. The next three essays – by Philip Irving Mitchell, David J. Carlson, and Meyrav Koren-Kuik – pertain to very specific works by authors G.K. Chesterton, Lord Dunsany, and Sylvia Townsend respectively. Each essay engages with the concept of the war and its impact largely peripherally through their subjects, but the authors are able to demonstrate how the war's conduct and legacy influenced their works in substantial ways. The final three essays in the collection concern E.R. Eddison and T.H. White. John Garrad's excellently written essay 'The Conquering Worm' places Eddison's work in relation to the high modernist movement by threading a delicate line of approach arguing that the author was similar in influence, but completely different in his literary execution, as the modernists. Joe Young's essay on Eddison is also an excellent contribution, one that when examined alongside of Garrad's work, will make

readers return to the author and view his work in a new light. The final essay in *Baptism of Fire* is by Ashley Pfeiffer on T.H. White. Pfeiffer places the author in a compelling historical context and this essay provides a perfect bookend for Nick Milne's essay at the beginning of the section.

Overall, one of the running themes of this volume is the tension between the way the war is written about by historians and literary scholars, particularly, about the idea of cultural change and psychological trauma influencing creative works. Despite his work being widely challenged by historians, Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* looms large here, as do his assumptions of the ironic cultural turn in British life and loss of innocence wrought by the war. To some degree, this volume confirms the need for more interdisciplinary conversation between those who are studying the same culture, albeit, from different approaches especially when examining such a complicated notion as psychological trauma. With this mild criticism in mind, when read together, all of these essays demonstrate a very vibrant and fertile field to till. Finally, *Baptism of Fire* demonstrates three things that are positive and thought-provoking. First, this book casts aside the idea that fantasy was mere escapism and demonstrates the seriousness of the genre within its era (and ours). Secondly, the book demonstrates, in each essay, just how important the First World War was to the genre; these authors were all either directly, or culturally indirectly, influenced by both the war, its conduct, and its memory/legacy. Finally, this volume demonstrates the limitations of cultural historical conceptualization of veterans in the interwar period and the need for us to examine the complexity of the era and how its authors viewed their own history within their fantasy. This final point – that we need to strip away many of our cultural assumptions and reexamine the authors' processes as a response to their own era – is one that is surely a tribute to a masterful collection that will lead to further scholarship in this field.

I.A. Isherwood, Gettysburg College.