



1-2019

Review of *The War that Used up Words: American Writers and the First World War*, by Hazel Hutchison

Ian A. Isherwood
Gettysburg College

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



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

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Recommended Citation

Isherwood, Ian. Review of *The War that Used up Words: American Writers and the First World War* by Hazel Hutchison. *Journal of Military History* 83, no. 1 (2019): 263-264.

This is the publisher'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/33>

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 *The War that Used up Words: American Writers and the First World War*, by Hazel Hutchison

Abstract

There is a vast array of scholarship on the literature of the First World War, much of it concerning British authors. When American war literature is considered, it is usually the so-called “Lost Generation” writers of the 1920s and 1930s. If the war had a significant effect upon American literature, it is argued, then it served as a trope for some of the great writers of the 1920s—Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and William Faulkner—who wrote of living in its generational shadow in the following decades of so-called peace.

Hazel Hutchison’s book is a corrective to the many assumptions about the war in American letters. In her beautifully written cultural history, *The War That Used Up Words*, Hutchison demonstrates to readers just how significant the war was to American writers who lived through it, served in it, and were writing about it while it was ongoing. She writes, “the really creative moment, the ignition spark of innovation, happened during the war through the work of such writers as Mary Borden and Henry James, Edith Wharton, Ellen La Motte, Grace Fallow Norton, E. E. Cummings, and John Dos Passos” (p. 3). This focus on American writers *during the war* changes our perceptions on the war’s impact as it has been traditionally interpreted *after the war*. [excerpt]

Keywords

World War I, literature, Lost Generation, war, writing

Disciplines

English Language and Literature | History | Social History

The War That Used Up Words: American Writers and the First World War. By Hazel Hutchison. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2015. ISBN 978-0-300-19502-6. Photos. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. x, 292. \$45.00.

There is a vast array of scholarship on the literature of the First World War, much of it concerning British authors. When American war literature is considered, it is usually the so-called “Lost Generation” writers of the 1920s and 1930s. If the war had a significant effect upon American literature, it is argued, then it served as a trope for some of the great writers of the 1920s—Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and William Faulkner—who wrote of living in its generational shadow in the following decades of so-called peace.

Hazel Hutchison’s book is a corrective to the many assumptions about the war in American letters. In her beautifully written cultural history, *The War That Used Up Words*, Hutchison demonstrates to readers just how significant the war was to American writers who lived through it, served in it, and were writing about it while it was ongoing. She writes, “the really creative moment, the ignition spark of innovation, happened during the war through the work of such writers as Mary Borden and Henry James, Edith Wharton, Ellen La Motte, Grace Fallow Norton, E. E. Cummings, and John Dos Passos” (p. 3). This focus on American writers *during the war* changes our perceptions on the war’s impact as it has been traditionally interpreted *after the war*.

Hutchison’s cast of characters represented a variety of opinions. All were affected by the war intellectually and emotionally. For Henry James the war was a horrendous cultural event, yet one in which the American writer (later British citizen) supported the allied cause wholeheartedly. For Edith Wharton, the war was a humanitarian opportunity to put her restless energy to use for the allies, providing war relief and writing essays to convince the American public to intervene. For La Motte, Norton, and Borden the war was a means of bearing witness to suffering from behind the lines. For Cummings and Dos Passos, the war proved a muse for their creative development as they drove ambulances in what La Motte called, “the backwash of war.” The distinction here is that all of these writers saw the conflict for its monumentality and each attempted to make sense of its impact while living through it.

The War That Used Up Words is refreshing in its blend of literary analysis and book/publishing history. Rather than being a work of literary criticism, this is a cultural history of the way in which the big issues of intervention played out among the American literati. Hutchison writes, “for many months before America officially entered the First World War in April 1917, it had been engaged in a war of words” (p. 7). That “war of words,” or the true scale of American war book publishing, has been forgotten, but deserves a reassessment. As Hutchison indicates, one American publisher alone, Houghton Mifflin, issued 100 war books from 1914 to 1918, totaling over 1.5 million copies in print. It is no wonder that this book

argues convincingly that “the First World War was a cultural and intellectual event before it was a practical reality” for Americans (p. 119).

Hutchison’s book is exceptionally careful in its analysis and thoroughly researched in American social history of this period. It is also an enjoyable reminder to military historians to always keep in mind Michael Howard’s maxims in “The Use and Abuse of Military History,” especially that context, here the cultural and intellectual ways that wars are conceptualized and imagined by those who lived through them, does indeed matter.

Ian Isherwood

Gettysburg College
Gettysburg, Pennsylvania

The Last Battle: Victory, Defeat, and the End of World War I. By Peter Hart. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. ISBN 978-0-19-087298-4. Illustrations. Notes. Index. Pp. x, 453. \$34.95.

In his latest work, Peter Hart wonders why the Allied Hundred Days Campaign in late 1918 has not received the same attention as other campaigns during the recent surge of World War I publications. In contrast to his more Anglo-centric books like *1918: A Very British Victory* (2009), Hart, the oral historian for the British Imperial War Museum, puts a distinctly Allied face on this work. What emerges is a story of how a coalition worked together, albeit somewhat hesitatingly, to clearly defeat the German Imperial Army through tactical and operational expertise, material supremacy, and the gradual collapse of German resistance.

Although Hart acknowledges his work may focus too much on the British army, he credits each of the Allied forces for contributing to ultimate victory. His chapters are organized by the individual battles that make up the Hundred Days Campaign. Maps for each chapter help the reader see how individual armies fit inside the grand strategy of the Allied commander-in-chief, Marshal Ferdinand Foch, but they also demonstrate how much space the Allies captured in just three months of mobile warfare. As Hart cycles through the battles of the different sectors on the Western Front, he describes the efficacy of the French, British, Americans, and Belgians at using combined-arms tactics to repeatedly defeat the Germans. Though he gives most of the recognition to British and American soldiers for spearheading the final offensives, Hart appreciates that victory in 1918 would not have been possible without French determination and perseverance.

Indeed, Ferdinand Foch is *the* key protagonist in this book as he soothes clashing personalities and nationalities to sustain a relentless offensive. The Canadians and Australians also play important roles in the assault formations that pave the way for the Allied advance. The Allies had thus clearly surpassed their opponents in terms of resources and skill on the battlefield, and German leaders recognized this uncomfortable reality. One of Hart’s most interesting anecdotes in this book recounts how Erich Ludendorff and Paul von Hindenburg manipulated the

Copyright of Journal of Military History is the property of Society for Military History and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.