

Peter HART: *Voices from the Front: An Oral History of the Great War*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, 440 pp., ISBN: 978-0190464936.

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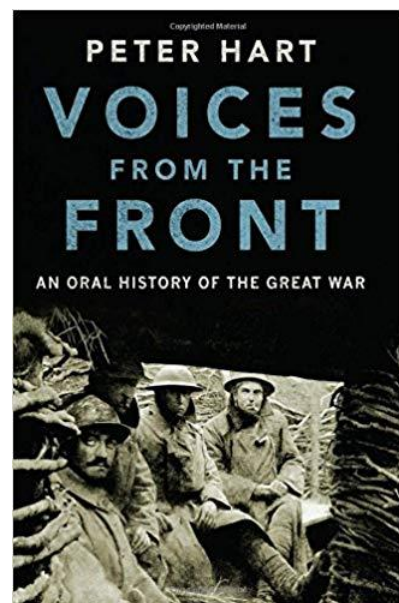
When Commemorative Literature Meets Oral History

The centenary commemoration of the first global conflict prompted a resurgence of historical accounts about the combatants. These ranged widely in scope and quality, though most shared the common goal of acknowledging the human dimension of the tragedy, at a time when the voices of the Great War have all gone silent, except for those preserved in recordings.

Such soundtracks include those that historian Peter Hart recorded in the 1980s and 1990s as part of his work at the Imperial War Museum in London. Two decades later, he offers here a history of the Great War that is less grand narrative than a canvas of the diverse experiences of the British veterans he met. The impressive result of his careful construction is a pleasure to read, yet it does raise some historiographical issues.

Hart writes in an easy to follow style intended to draw readers from all backgrounds. In so doing, he does not seek to offer a new thesis argument, but to retrace the British combat experience through the oral historical record, much in the way he has done in several other volumes written for a general readership. The only detectable claim may be more of a plea for the value of oral history, as many of the records he helped compile at the Imperial War Museum are unexploited by either amateurs or professionals.

Over the course of thirteen chapters, Hart covers the war in a mix of chronological and thematic orders. Though this book is about the British experience, the author is careful to include coverage of lesser known realms such as the front in Mesopotamia. In so doing, he makes clear the mix of dread and boredom all men experienced, and how the horror of mud, a constantly recurring theme on the Western European



front, could easily be seen as a blessing by those stuck for weeks in the desert without a bath and only one bottle of water per day (p. 135).

The sample of interviewees naturally skews the evidence on several levels. First, because the interviews took place in the 1980s and 1990s, the memory of those recounting their experiences will suffer. While no one would deny the experience of the participants, the evidentiary value is diminished as details may have been transposed. A chapter on naval warfare, for example, involves a sailor recounting his time aboard the HMS Kent that sank the German ship Nuremberg in December 1914. Unfortunately, the witness refers to the sinking of the Köln, which occurred in summer of that year, and where the Kent was not present. It is thus unclear where and when the witness was posted, though there is no doubt that he was a sailor on active duty. If accuracy cannot be guaranteed why should one rely on such accounts? Simply put, the liveliness of the quotes and some of the anecdotes that stayed with the participants, especially people who were so young when they experienced the horror.

A second critical element in the evidence Hart uses is that the “generation of 1914” is often more likely to be that of 1918 or beyond. Indeed, most of the combatants interviewed were underage when they joined. Senior officers, as well as any men who reached, say, middle age right after the war are missing from the oral record. Hart is aware of this, for he also relies on oral interviews conducted in the 1960s and 1970s by other historians and some journalists, thus correcting some of the imbalances found in his sources. Still, the age and social background of the interviewees, though skewed, is not to be discounted. It helps paint a canvas and speculate on how they held up under the pressure. Nuggets of humor can be found in numerous instances, and the efforts of soldiers at maintaining social cohesion (despite the frustration with some of their orders) is quite remarkable. That said, Hart stays away from any of the historiographical controversies his evidence would help engage, including the recent dual claims of coercion and duty to explain why soldiers held out for so long.

Third, one wishes that Hart had relied on well-established narratives of the Great War, such as John Keegan’s or Hugh Strachan’s to back up his narrative. His only citations include the oral histories he uses, and thus some of his comments may puzzle specialists as well as anyone with a passing knowledge of the Great War. For example, Hart’s explanation of the extended battles of Vimy and Arras as a response to the French army’s mutinies, is both facile and inaccurate: that the French government desperately needed the British to achieve a spring 1917 victory is true, but their request that Gen. Haig coordinate with General Nivelle in dual April offensives was in response to French homefront issues, not the problems in the French army. As for the mutinies, they only began April 29 and did not «spiral out of control» (Hart’s words) to their highest level until May 15, 1917 after the British offensives ended, and when

General Pétain had already replaced General Nivelle. This and other errors do not discount the quality of the testimonies Hart has chosen to share with readers, yet they do skew clearly verifiable aspects of the war record and reflect a rush to summarize that is unnecessary.

Hart also skips some important social issues that have come up in many recent studies of the Great War. Whereas he ably presents the matter of sexual tensions (his selected testimonies about the brothels are both heart wrenching and funny), he misses out on the very heterogeneity of the British forces. For example, Australian testimonies are ably incorporated into the narrative, but nowhere is the matter of nationalism considered. Since the founding myth of Australian independence is reportedly the British defeat at Gallipoli, it would have been interesting to learn how Australians felt in other sections of the front. Similarly, especially after the Americans entered the war, the matter of racial segregation became more pronounced. The UK was one of two armies to incorporate colonial troops, but we catch few glimpses of their presence, despite the fact that they were active from the very beginning of the war onward. Consequently, one gets the impression that British forces were far more homogenous than is really the case, and this in turn offers a comforting yet distorted vision of the war.

Hart's agenda, to make oral history accessible, actually falls into a more recent wave of calls for broadening this kind of historical method, as it can also be practiced as an exercise at the school and university levels and in non-academic settings. Other national military depositories, such as the US National World War II Museum or the French Service Historique de la Défense have converted their holdings to digital formats accessible online (those in France, regrettably can only be listened to onsite, but without the tedious loading and unloading of the old magnetic tapes). What is missing, however, is the critical apparatus that would help handle the evidence offered. This is a sensitive matter best demonstrated, for example in the gargantuan effort of the Shoah Foundation under the leadership of Steven Spielberg to record as many Holocaust survivors' experiences as possible. Such interviews depict staggering events, and the deep trauma associated with the victims' experiences also means that occasional errors of place and time cannot be corrected so easily by the oral historians conducting the interviews. Other factors such as sympathy may skew the record.

One comes away from Hart's work convinced of the value of oral histories, yet cautious about over relying on them. It is not the impressionistic statements of the witnesses that are at issue (anyone using personal or even political correspondence in their research will find their share of such comments that are both useful and frustrating), but the risk of too much empathy. One cannot but be in awe of the sacrifice these soldiers had to make daily, and the graphic nature of some of what they share makes

one ache for their suffering and that of their loved ones. Consequently, the necessary distance any historian needs to emphasize to reach a reasonably balanced conclusion cannot be achieved. Hart describes his work as a deeply personal endeavor, and one senses the passion for testimony and the respect he shows his interviewees. Yet one wishes he would occasionally cast a critical eye on some of what they said.

While passion and lucidity do not mix easily, one remains thankful for Hart's efforts. Transnationally, too many elderly children of Great War combatants remember only the silence of their genitors regarding the conflict. This volume helps enlighten the personal experience.