

What war was like

If poetry was the literary form of the First World War, it was fiction that best expressed the reality of the Second

by William Boyd

My next-door neighbour for many years, Colonel Peter Peyman, was a veteran of Dunkirk. As a young subaltern he'd fought in the rearguard and had been lucky to be evacuated. After his death his widow bequeathed me his small library of books on Dunkirk, all works of reputable military history. They are thick with marginalia: "Rubbish!", "Never happened", "Wrong! I was there" and so forth. One can read a sentence like, "The 3rd battalion advanced under an artillery barrage and suffered many casualties" and, while

acknowledging that the 3rd Battalion must have indeed advanced, have no sense at all of what it was to undergo the actual experience of being part of that fatal manoeuvre. In writing about war and warfare, the subjective view always wins over the objective when it comes to answering the fundamental question: What Was It Really Like? And this is where the novel comes into its own.

As if in response to this demand the Imperial War Museum has begun publishing a series of forgotten novels about the Second World War under the rubric of Imperial

War Museum Classics (IWM). The criteria are fairly strict: the novels must have been written by people who directly experienced those aspects of the war they narrate and the books themselves must have "literary merit". The first four titles were published last year and now we have numbers five and six: Fred Majdalany's *Patrol* (published in 1953) and Peter Elstob's *Warriors for the Working Day* (1960). Each novel, in its own way, makes for singular and compelling reading, and not just because of the authenticity of the experiences related.

Fred Majdalany's short novel is set in the North African desert in 1943, after the Allied invasion of Operation Torch. As the title suggests it is the account of one particular patrol undertaken by a handful of men – led by an officer called Major Tim Sheldon – with the objective of scouting out one small strongpoint in the German lines. In fact the ordering and assembling of the patrol and the patrol itself bookend a long flashback where Sheldon remembers his convalescence in Algiers after sustaining an earlier wound. He visits a brothel. He becomes obsessed with one of his nurses and they have a brief affair before he returns to the front.

Majdalany himself served in the Lancashire Fusiliers in North Africa and Italy and like all the IWM novels *Patrol* reeks with the details, textures and felt-life of unrivalled autobiographical information. However, what sets his novel apart is the way he gives the context of this tiny local engagement its full import in the great scheme of the war. One can see how the individual soldier is the unwitting agent of a complexity of military decision-making stretching further and further away, back to distant generals at a distant HQ.

In this instance the mission of this particular patrol is arrived at almost by happenstance. Some sort of patrolling activity is mooted by a brigadier to keep the men on their toes. A place name on a map catches an adjutant's eye; he lazily suggests it as an objective for no specific strategic reason. Army wheels are set in motion and, on one particular night, Tim Sheldon and six soldiers creep out into the darkness of the African desert to meet their fate. This is how Majdalany sees the process, cast in a powerful metaphor:

To have a spear-point you had to have a spear, though at times it did seem to take an awful lot of shaft to support very little point; but that was a prejudiced notion usually confined to those who chanced to be attached to the point rather than the shaft.

The tone of this passage is typical – and it also applies to Elstob's novel, as well as the other four IWM Classics published in 2019. Together these novels produce a remarkable harmony of voice: a world-weary cynicism and resigned stoicism. None relies on any kind of martial heroism – or the language of that trope – to make its point. War is deeply boring and uncomfortable, and intermittently utterly terrifying. You can hate your fellow soldiers as easily as like them. The officers commanding you may well be arrogant fools and idiots. You feel no great antagonism towards the enemy and a baleful eye is cast on those “back home”.

Patrol

By Fred Majdalany

Imperial War Museum Classics, 192pp, £8.99

Warriors for the Working Day

By Peter Elstob

Imperial War Museum Classics, 320pp, £8.99

The battlefield in Peter Elstob's *Warriors for the Working Day* is Normandy after the 1944 invasion. His alter ego is a young tank commander called Michael Brook. The Sherman tank that Brook commands has a crew of five and the novel is intimate with the relationships between the competing personalities on board. There is plenty of banter and the graveyard humour of men confined in a tiny shared space is underscored by the knowledge that the Sherman was outgunned and under-armoured in comparison to the German tanks it was fighting. In his excellent introduction Alan Jeffreys reminds us that Shermans, susceptible to catching fire when hit, were nicknamed “Ronsons” after the advertising slogan used to promote Ronson cigarette lighters – lighters that lit “first time, every time”. Beneath the coarse camaraderie is the knowledge that, when in action, the tank crew was in near-permanent, acute, potentially fatal danger. It added a very dark edge to their wisecracks.

Warriors for the Working Day is an exceptionally gripping account of what it must have been like to be a member of a tank crew as it fought its way through Normandy and across France towards the German frontier. It is a more conventional novel than *Patrol*, however. For all its pace and vivid colour Elstob has a tendency to reach for a cliché rather too often and, like many novels of its era, relies on a kind of cor-blimey demotic to convey character that hasn't aged well:

They was windy – that's what they was – windy. They seen a few Jerry tanks and they said “Oo la la we've 'ad it” and they scarpered orf 'ome.

But the overall sensibility of *Warriors* is very similar to *Patrol*. Terms such as heroism, pluck, fighting spirit, derring-do and the other indulgent euphemisms meant to spur on men at war are in short supply. Men do behave heroically but with little forethought, more as a matter of instinct and survival than with a view of anything legendary and glorious.

Postwar, both Majdalany and Elstob had successful careers as writers. In addition to *Patrol*, Majdalany wrote a fine novel about the battle of Monte Cassino called

The Monastery as well as writing military histories and working as a journalist for the *Daily Mail*.

Elstob also wrote well-received works of military history, but his progress after the war was altogether more rickety and unconventional. As an entrepreneur he and a partner made a fortune from a beauty product they invented called Yeast-Pac. He was also a successful balloonist – he almost made a transatlantic crossing in 1958 – and for many years he was a stalwart vice-president of the writers' organisation English PEN. However, *Warriors* is his magnum opus, just as *Patrol* is for Fred Majdalany.

But *Patrol*, I would argue, is more than just a grittily authentic voice from the front line; more than just a clear-eyed, unromantic record of lived wartime experience. Majdalany is evidently aware of the many literary resources available to a novelist and his exploration of the mind of Tim Sheldon often verges on very cleverly-handled, impressionistic stream-of-consciousness – a stylistic choice not often found in war novels. Moreover, the book is shaped with deliberate knowingness, its structure carefully and cleverly coming full circle, allowing it to be ranked alongside that other great book about the North African campaign, Keith Douglas's remarkable memoir *Alamein to Zem-Zem* (1946).

One of the consequences of this Imperial War Museum series is that it permits us to see how the novel came to be the dominant literary form of the Second World War – an intriguing contrast to the First World War, where poetry more or less reigned unchallenged as the way the imagination might engage with the conflict. Poetry was written by combatants between 1939 and 1945, but compared to the mass of excellent novels that were produced about the war it seems almost a pastime rather than a vocation.

Perhaps this is to do with the fact that serious poetry after the First World War had become “modern” and difficult and therefore appealed to an intellectual minority, while the novel was democratic and flourishing. Also, the soldiers of the Second World War were better educated and better read throughout the ranks than their equivalents in 1914-18. Novel writing was not an elite pursuit. Confronted by the astonishing subject matter that they were living through, soldiers, sailors and aviators decided that the novel was the best medium to try to make sense of what they were experiencing – the madness of a world at war – as this superb series will no doubt continue to demonstrate. ● *William Boyd's new novel, “Trio”, will be published in October this year*