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Max Arthur, *The Faces of World War I: The Great War in Words and Pictures*. London: Cassell Illustrated, 2007. Pp. 288. ISBN 978-1-84403-561-8.

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As war books go, this one excels. It is purely and simply a powerful photographic statement of the human experience of war—or rather the inhumanity of war. It doesn't moralize. It skillfully and unabashedly presents the evidence. The flow, chronological from pre-WWI to its aftermath, is organized in yearly sections each given historical context through short, well-written descriptive texts. One opens with the widespread and naïve euphoria of a "quick" end and closes with a human nightmare of unprecedented proportions.

The author, Max Arthur, a Londoner, journalist, historian, bestselling author known for his *Forgotten Voices* volumes of both world wars,<sup>1</sup> has drawn his materials largely from the rich trove of the Imperial War Museum's archives. His widely respected skill as an oral historian, a crucial contribution to this book, is used to bring (200+) expertly edited black-and-white images to life through the words of those who were there.

As Ian Hislop writes in a short but incisive introduction, "we are not to be protected from pictures of the dead" (7). Indeed, they are raw. But this is not just a book about death at war. It is also about men—mostly British Empire soldiers on the Western Front—in all their guises. Dirty. Anxious. Playful. Wounded. Proud. Traumatized. Victorious. Despairing, in many cases, when returned home to hunger and joblessness.

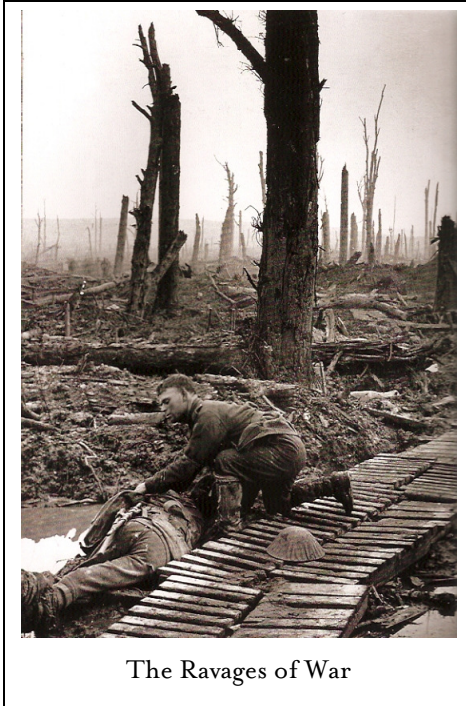
By carefully editing short quotations to accompany relevant photos, the author lets individuals speak for themselves. In many cases it takes only a few words or a simple look into the camera. The author, expert in gathering oral histories, shows his unvarnished sense of the "everyman's" voice. Below an image of six Germans manning a machine gun, a British soldier, Sgt. James Payne, recounts: "We were attacking the last German trench. We were all knocked out. Their machine guns were waiting for us. We didn't get through. None of us. The whole battalion was wiped out. There was a big shell hole full of dead men and dying and blinded. Tall men got it through the jaw, shorter men through the eyes. I was walking along and a bullet blew all my teeth out" (147).

In one image a short, wounded British soldier, his nose and mouth crudely bandaged, his helmet askew, one arm wrapped in gauze, walks arm-in-arm through a muddy field with his "prisoner," a tall, bespectacled German with a half-smoked cigarette between his fingers. They have just escaped the savagery of war. Do we think of them as friends or enemies?

While the reader will undoubtedly find some images more jarring than others, the well-edited visual sequences reveal the author's keen understanding of the human side of war. The impact is cumulative and powerful. One sees a man preparing to leave for war, sitting

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<sup>1</sup> *Forgotten Voices of the Great War: A History of World War I in the Words of the Men and Women Who Were There* (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2004), and *Forgotten Voices of the World War II: A New History of World War II in the Words of the Men and Women Who Were There* (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2004)



The Ravages of War

naked in a small water basin in his modest, dark, London home, his back being washed by his wife. Alongside is an image of top-hatted gentleman and elegantly dressed lady at an Eton-Harrow cricket game. One-third of the twenty-two players in that game would later die in the war. In another image, soldiers struggle ankle-deep in oozing mud to draw a cannon forward, its wheels themselves sunk deep into the same thick ooze. In another, entitled by the author “The Ravages of War,” a lone soldier tugs at the uniform of a dead comrade astride a water-filled shell hole to recover personal objects. Behind him extends a horrific view familiar to the Western Front of a shell-torn forest with blackened tree stumps in a sea of convulsed mud. Then there’s John (Barney) Hines staring at the camera, his hands full of money drawn from enemy soldiers and varied found objects lying about his feet. Known as the “souvenir king,” he had the distinction of being singled out on the Kaiser’s “personal” wanted

list for his grim treatment of German corpses.

*Faces* is a perfect companion volume to John Keegan’s *Illustrated History of the First World War*.<sup>2</sup> This work balances factual history with maps and diverse color and black and white images to document the war. And while the two are coincidentally exactly the same in format, Max Arthur’s book is highly Anglocentric. And by this is meant no criticism. It is only mentioned to recall the obvious: that the Great War extended to both the Western and Eastern Fronts, where the experiences were akin and equally tragic for all concerned. Most probably, it is the sheer senselessness of the stalemated trench warfare and the enormous human toll it exacted that bring us back, again and again, to the Western Front as symbolic of the whole War. It induced its own special mental torment in those asked to enter the killing fields. By this call to duty, vast numbers of a whole young male generation were decimated. The emotion was long ago captured in Erich Maria Remarque’s 1929 epic WWI novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (*Im Westen nichts Neues* / “Nothing New in the West”). An immediate bestseller worldwide, it was turned a year later into an Oscar-winning film by American director Lewis Milestone. As with *Faces*, it left an indelible impression of the tragedy of war. But within a decade the horror was repeated on a vaster scale with unimaginable violence now extended to civilian populations. And since that time, it has been calculated, the cumulative military- and battle-related civilian casualties worldwide have exceeded those of World War II: in Vietnam at least 1.5 million, in Cambodia several million, in Iraq and Iran at least one million, not to mention Biafra, Uganda, Darfur, and Chechnya. Do we not know how to learn?

Perhaps the best compliment I can render *Faces* is to say one cannot close it without being overwhelmed by the unromantic day-to-day rituals of war—especially at a time when

<sup>2</sup> NY: Knopf, 2001.

countless computer games turn the human suffering and despair of war into soulless digital encounters. Sadly, this book may not reach that audience.

This book is beautifully crafted. The design, layout, quality of paper, and choice of typefaces are credited to Carole Ash and the printing and binding in China to Toppan Ltd. In that respect, it joins the best of the coffee-table books albeit with a grim message.