



## *Veteran Narratives and the Collective Memory of the Vietnam War*

by John A. Wood.

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Firsthand accounts of dramatic, tension-filled events help historians and their audiences identify with historical actors; they make history come alive. This “tyranny of the witness,” as one scholar calls it, “is such that their words are given enormous weight—despite their being biased and sometimes false.”<sup>1</sup> Such reservations aside, the popular appeal of witness testimony has spawned major oral history programs, classroom interactions with “those that were there,” and an explosion of autobiographies by people from all walks of life.

Given this trend in historical scholarship, an assessment of witness testimony and historical remembrance was much needed. Historian John Wood (PhD, Temple Univ.) has made an excellent contribution to the field of historical memory and the Vietnam War. He explores the process of gathering witness testimonials from memoirs and the use of such sources by scholars and the general public alike:

Owing to their longtime prevalence and popularity, veteran memoirs have undoubtedly influenced America’s collective memory of the Vietnam conflict for decades. The same can be said for films, news media reports, political rhetoric, and other cultural products. But war narratives produced by “those who were there” have long held a special authority for people, Americans included.... Writing a memoir ... has become a seemingly mandatory milestone for famous Vietnam veterans. (2)

Wood assesses the “Vietnam narrative genre” by analyzing fifty-eight “of the most prominent memoirs and oral histories published between 1967 and 2005” (5).

The book’s introduction, “They Were There,” articulates a dual argument about the popularity of veteran memoirs and the reality of their mediated construction. Chapter 1, “Who Were the Vietnam Veteran Memoirists?” sketches the demographics of the writers Wood analyzes. Chapters 2–6<sup>2</sup> investigate salient aspects of the veteran experience as represented, even overrepresented, Wood writes, by the memoirs that form the basis of his arguments. The seventh and final chapter, “Those Who Came Before and After,” and the conclusion, “The Vietnam Memoir Legacy,” review the impact of these works.

Most memoirists describe combat as terrifying and exhausting rather than glorious, and they render battlefield wounds and deaths in graphic detail. Veteran-authors also accurately depict the great difficulty American forces experienced in their attempts to counter the Vietcong’s unconventional tactics. Veterans make it clear that the war was fought among civilians who were indistinguishable from the enemy, a situation that led to death and injury for countless innocent bystanders, including women and children. Memoirs also show that a profound anti-Vietnamese racism existed among American troops; the use of racial slurs such as “gook,” “dink,” and “slope” was commonplace. (25)

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1. Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (NY: Routledge, 2009) 34.

2. Respectively, “Combat Conditions and the Vietnamese People,” “Race and Racism,” “Men, Women, and Vietnam,” “The Return Home and Life after Vietnam,” and “The Political Content of Veteran Narratives.”

The gritty details of armed conflict presented in the memoirs will more than satisfy readers seeking to encounter war in all its ugliness. But Wood, like other scholars, rightly doubts that the depicted carnage and moral compromises successfully convey war's true nature to the uninitiated or help inoculate societies against repeating its horrors. Nevertheless, he notes,

though a cynical attitude predominates in memoirists' depictions of combat, a number of authors express pride in their service. Such veterans do not suggest that their tours were a waste of time, or that American efforts in Vietnam were ridiculously futile.... The architects and managers of the Vietnam War, the generals and statesmen, can give us insight into grand strategies, but ordinary veterans can tell us how those plans played out on the battlefield. From the accounts of former infantrymen, readers learn what happened when demands for higher body counts trickled down to platoon level, or what pacification looked like from the perspective of the GIs who did the pacifying. And veterans usually depict combat in a realistic fashion; readers are confronted with a view of warfare that is as authentic as it is terrifying. (29, 45)

The enthusiasm for these memoirs extends beyond a popular audience to their use as evidence in scholarly works and as supplemental readings in classroom settings.

Wood also carefully explains how racism and sexism in war settings are apparent in the postwar accounts, reminding us that “a memoir is not an objective or comprehensive history of the war, but an account of one veteran's experiences. Such a limited outlook guarantees that some issues will not receive proper attention” (59). He sensibly reminds us that even trained scholars may fall into the trap of drawing uncritically on memoirs, as if they were not examples of a reconstructed reality (4).

A fruitful line of analysis throughout the book is its examination of the process of writing memoirs. Wood acknowledges an obvious selection bias: the memoir writers he assesses are predominantly white, male, middle-class, former officers or senior enlisted men with combat experience (10, 47). Instead of only listing social statistical details, he perceptively evaluates the effect of these factors on *both* the writers' war experiences and their postwar written reflections on them. He also takes account of the ways publishers and mass media shape the histories the public encounters. He finds that both the producers and the reviewers of these works tend to evince a moderate leftist, anti-war slant (98–99). These provisos, taken together, are a useful reminder that constructed versions of reality are too often assumed to convey a reliably complete and accurate picture of the past.

An additional strength of the book is its identification of an “odd duality” of anti-war and anti-Vietnamese sentiments in the veteran memoirs. Wood concludes that “the reason for the coexistence of these two seemingly incompatible themes is directly related to the fundamental weakness of personal narratives: limited and biased perspective.... [S]ince veteran memoirs represent the experiences of only one specific group of people, they are inherently limited in their outlook on the war” (26).

Errors in the book are few and trivial.<sup>3</sup> One does, however, miss some discussion of the influence of memoirs by Second World War and Korean War veterans on those of Vietnam veterans and vice versa (108). Brevity has its downside.

These quibbles aside, *Veteran Narratives and the Collective Memory of the Vietnam War* is discerning investigation of historical remembrance in the writings of Vietnam War veterans. John Wood deftly reveals how prewar, wartime, and postwar experiences shaped the composition and content of published memoirs. In the process, he reminds us that even biased and flawed veteran accounts—used appropriately—offer valuable insights into the nature of warfare and the ways that societies choose to remember it.

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3. E.g., the anachronistic identification of a Bell HU-1 Iroquois helicopter as a UH-1.