

EDITORIAL

SHORTLY AFTER THE UNITED KINGDOM DECLARED WAR in August 1914, British writer H. G. Wells predicted that “this, the greatest of all wars, is not just another war—it is the last war.” Although Wells had previously been an outspoken pacifist, he had become convinced that military action was necessary to achieve peace and that the scale of the conflict would be so vast and the consequences so devastating that the practice of war would effectively become obsolete. This idea was quickly adopted as a slogan to justify participation and promote recruitment; as a prediction, however, it proved to be overly optimistic. While there was a brief period of peace following the Armistice in 1918, it did little to resolve the underlying social, political, and economic tensions, which soon threatened to erupt once again. By the early 1930s Wells was clearly aware of this, as his 1933 novel *The Shape of Things to Come* outlined his vision of the next major global conflagration, in which all of the participating nations as well as neutral states would be virtually bombed out of existence. In other words, Wells argued that his original prediction was not wrong but simply premature, as WWII would truly be the greatest and last war.

Wells’ novel not only anticipated weapons of mass destruction but also suggested a possible justification for their development. For example, American physicist Robert Oppenheimer, director of the Manhattan Project during WWII, reportedly recruited scientists by telling them that the atomic bomb would “end this war...and might end all war.” The same claim was used to justify hydrogen bomb testing in the postwar period, as it was thought that no one would initiate a war that could only end in global destruction. The idea of a “last war” thus gradually morphed into the principle of nuclear deterrence. Instead of promoting peace, however, it merely gave rise to a new arms race, which resulted in countless military actions around the world. Despite the formation of organized anti-war movements near the end of the century (inspired, in part, by the threat of global destruction) war became a ubiquitous part of modern life, and many countries now exist in

a semi-permanent state of war. Indeed, the business of war is booming like never before, and there appears to be no end in sight.

It is no surprise, then, that war also became a permanent concern for modern writers. Some critics have attempted to trace how changes in literary form and style reflect fundamental changes in the way wars are fought, understood, represented, and remembered. Wells' work is particularly instructive in this regard, as it shows how modern war is increasingly understood as a global crisis that marks both the culmination and collapse of western civilization. Susan Sontag famously diagnosed this tendency to imagine apocalyptic scenarios of global disaster as a neurotic symptom of widespread cultural trauma brought about by the constant terror of modern war. As Sontag explained, the purpose of imagining such disasters is "to normalize what is psychologically unbearable."

As we commemorate the centenary of WWI and reflect on its many reverberations, *The Dalhousie Review* has put together a special section that examines the experience of war from many perspectives. The section begins with Jamie Gibbs' story "Apparitions," which is set during the American Civil War and features an elderly couple who attempt to save the life of an enemy soldier. This story not only challenges the idea of military service as a noble sacrifice, but it also shows how the shared experience of loss can potentially lead to forgiveness. The section then features an interview with Sean Howard and an excerpt from his new book *The Photographer's Last Picture*—a collection of experimental poems inspired by WWI photographs. Like Gibbs, Howard urges readers to avoid thinking of war in terms of good versus evil, as the celebration of valour and sacrifice is often used to justify future armed conflict. Anthony Lusvardi's story "Relics" is also set during WWI and provides a vivid description of the inhuman conditions of modern war and the sense of powerlessness and hopelessness felt by many soldiers. This story is followed by two poems—Chris Oke's "Five Lives Lost" and Kieran Egan's "The Grasses of Kaliningrad"—which describe the lingering traces of WWII on the natural landscape. Sharon Goldberg's essay "Revisiting Vietnam" similarly examines how the traces of the Vietnam War continue to be felt today—particularly in terms of the environmental damage inflicted on the land and the emotional damage inflicted on the people. Goldberg's essay is also an autobiographical story that describes her own personal journey as an American who initially supported the war but then became disillusioned and joined the anti-war movement. The act of revisit-

ing Vietnam is thus an attempt to resolve a personal as well as historical trauma. Daniel Taylor's "My Nuclear Family" also examines the impact of war on the lives of individual people by describing how the fear of nuclear war becomes a strangely comforting bond that holds a family together. Over time, however, their obsessive need to imagine and prepare for disaster also threatens to tear them apart, as it undermines their ability to empathize and care for one another. Jason White's "The Passage" similarly focuses on the experiences of a family during wartime, although this story is set in contemporary Syria and deals more directly with the vulnerability of children who live in war zones. This is also the focus of Roméo Dallaire's essay "All Humans Are Human," which describes his ongoing efforts to prevent the recruitment and deployment of child soldiers. The section then concludes with Daniel McKay's essay "Not Quite the End of the Line," which provides a brief history of prisoner-of-war films and argues that these films should be more realistic and focus more on the process of reconciliation.

The theme that connects all of the pieces in this special section, therefore, is their common desire to represent the experience of war without reinforcing nationalist ideologies. In other words, these authors do not want "to normalize what is psychologically unbearable," but rather to understand the traumatic effects of war—on soldiers and civilians alike—and to suggest possible ways in which we can bring an end to the pattern of violence and fear that has characterized the past century.

Our summer issue also features two new chronicles: Jerry White's review of the summer superhero blockbuster *Wonder Woman* and Elizabeth Edwards' review of recent books on the late pop star David Bowie.