

D. C. Gill. *How We Are Changed By War: A Study of Letters and Diaries from Colonial Conflicts to Operation Iraqi Freedom*. New York: Routledge, 2010. 304pp.

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“This book is, in itself, a letter. It is not a traditional letter that begins with ‘Dear so-and-so.’ It is instead a letter written to a distant uncle of mine, William ‘Billy’ Cover, who was killed fighting in World War I. Sixty years after he died, I met him for the first time” (1). Diana C. Gill is an independent scholar who, as a teenager, happened to discover an old darkened volume of poetry among her mother’s books. In the marginalia, her great-great-uncle had “written notes to himself” during his time serving in the First World War. “Sometimes he wrote about liking a particular poem,” she explains, “but mostly he wrote about feeling lonely and missing home” (1). This acquaintance with the loneliness and hope brought on by war, and a soldier’s need to record his feelings (even despite the likely chance that no one would ever read them), led her to search out other wartime correspondence and diaries. The result is her book, *How We Are Changed By War: A Study of Letters and Diaries from Colonial Conflicts to Operation Iraqi Freedom*.

In it, she has curated correspondence from both the American men and women at war and their interlocutors back home. The correspondence spans from colonial conflicts on American soil to Operation Iraqi Freedom half-way around the world. Some letters she shares with us were handwritten and delivered on horseback; some are emailed. What

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Gill does is examine that, despite the differences in the ideologies and arenas of the conflicts, and despite the relative ease or difficulty of sending correspondence and committing thoughts and feelings to paper or keyboard, the constant remains that soldiers experience a transformation of self in times of war. This transformation is only visible because of their need to record their feelings and thoughts – and the common desire to bear witness to oneself comes through regardless of the conflict’s time period.

Of course, the title says that “we” are changed by war – not just combatants. The book does a wonderful job of considering testimonies from civilians, too, such as spouses and parents waiting to hear from their loved ones. There is a particularly interesting look at the roles of civilians as spectators to war, and the “psychological price” they pay in such a role (154). The excerpts from diaries and letters provide fascinating glimpses into not only the writers and the conflicts themselves but also American culture at the time at which they are writing.

Her examination of the letters and diary entries and their commonalities is extremely thorough. The letters are not organised in chronological order but instead grouped together based on their themes. In the introduction, she states that the writing reveals a “shared quality of the self that is endangered by the event of war” (3). The book works as a list of just exactly how that sense of self is endangered, with the primary sources as examples. However, it also works as a look at how the sense of self is formed. Experiences and feelings committed to language, she explains, forces one to reflect upon oneself and the life-altering incidents that become commonplace in war. “As a catalyst for change,” she writes, “war unarms more than it arms soldiers and civilians. It makes

them vulnerable to that strange mixture of egoism and anguish as unexpected change threatens to sweep all before it” (274).

If the book has a weakness, it is in Gill’s application of a theoretical framework to her study. Her list of secondary sources are disparate and very numerous, though the ties she makes to them are seldom weak. Perhaps introducing a very specific methodology to how she chose and analyzed the letters and diaries would have helped to better organize the book. Though written somewhat informally, the book’s quick changes from one era to another and sheer amount of primary sources make it a substantial read. Perhaps fewer examples and more analysis would have been a better, if less literary, approach.

Nonetheless, the look at similarities between recording struggles with the self in times of war throughout three centuries of American conflict is interesting and astute. As a critical text, but even more so as an engaging read for anyone interested in history or personal writing, Diana C. Gill has written an accessible and moving letter to her great-great-uncle.