

# ***World War I from Local Perspectives: History, Literature and Visual Arts. . .*** **reviewed by Jane Mattisson Ekstam**

## ***World War I from Local Perspectives: History, Literature and Visual Arts. Austria, Britain, Croatia, France, Germany, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Poland and the United States***

**by Mirosława Buchholtz and Grzegorz Koneczniak (eds.)**  
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*World War I from Local Perspectives* offers a new perspective on the process of recollecting World War One, advocating that we take into consideration subsequent experiences of humanity on its way to what the editors call "dehumanization" (9) as we assess the effects of the war on individual lives and careers. Such experiences include World War Two, the Cold War and the so-called Cyber War. The local sources referred to in *World War I from Local Perspectives* are not part of the canon of war or postwar literature or art. They have been selected to demonstrate the relative insignificance of class, gender, or ethnicity when evaluating human suffering during the war; such differences are indeed arbitrary, argue the contributors. Texts written by a wide variety of writers are discussed: servants and aristocrats; women on the home front who wrote poetry as well as made masks for facially disfigured soldiers; Jews, Poles, and Russians in Central and Eastern Europe; Germans, Italians, English, and Irish in Western Europe; and Jews and Americans across the Atlantic.

The texts range from letters to spoken accounts, travel writing to literary texts, and theatre performances to visual arts. The titles of the 12 chapters reveal the diversity of material discussed: 1. Henry James and Burgess Noakes: the evolution of an employer/servant relationship during World War I; 2. Lord Dunsany's war tales: realism and fantasy; 3. Poems from the home front: Marian Allen and Vera Brittain; 4. *History Today*: Ireland and the Great War; 5. The Abbey Theatre in the context of the Great War and its centenary: The past and the present; 6. Echoes of the Great War in Italian literature and theatre of the First World War and the interwar period; 7. Eccentric contemporaneity: Gustav Meyrink's views on the Great War; 8. Jews and Poles in the German-occupied East: Two scenes from the First World War; 9. American Zionism in the World War I years: Between academic discourse and pragmatic approach; 10. Recollections of the First World War by the Old Believers living in Poland; 11. Fates of the suppressed: Social criticism against the background of the First World War in Miroslav Krleža's *The Croatian God Mars*; and 12. Disfigurement and defacement in (post) World-War-One art: Francis Derwent Wood, Anna Coleman Ladd, Hannah Höch and Kader Attia.

American readers may find Katie Sommer's chapter on Henry James and Burgess Noakes particularly interesting. The chapter discusses the letters written by Noakes to his employer, James (Noakes was James's valet and served at the front in the early months of the war, until he was wounded). James's answers are also discussed. Both sets of letters are housed at the Center for Henry James Studies at Creighton University, U.S.A. James demonstrates a parental concern for his valet. His letters are encouraging, designed to keep up Noakes's spirits and to assure him that his old job awaits him at the end of the war. Indeed, James is instrumental in ensuring that his valet will gain a leave of absence (from which he will never return). As Sommer notes, Noakes never forgot the kindness of his employer. The story is a moving one and especially poignant as it involves a well-known writer as well as an obscure servant.

Bożenna Chylinska's chapter on American Zionism is also particularly fascinating as it elucidates the decisive role played by American Jewry during the war. Thanks to the war, important changes took place in the Zionist movement as it addressed the problems and hardships of Diaspora Jews. As Chylinska demonstrates, "the mass following which Zionism gained during the war years resulted from

the strong hope that the war would bring a solution to the Jewish questions" (157). It became both necessary and possible to unite all American Zionists into one organization, culminating in the creation of the Zionist Organization of America in 1918.



### The Remarkable Work of Francis Derwent Wood

*World War I from Local Perspectives* lives up to its editors' promise that it will present a new view of the war that enables the reader to better understand the effects on the individual heading toward dehumanization. Resisting the temptation to focus on trauma, as many recent studies have done, *World War I from Local Perspectives* seeks to "disentangle the many threads of the frayed tapestry brought to global attention thanks to the human fascination with numbers" (10). War is not about how many people died; it is an individual tragedy in which differences of class, ethnic allegiance, and gender are arbitrary. This, above all, is what the varied accounts discussed in *World War I from Local Perspectives* demonstrate so amply and convincingly. The editors have made a fine job of bringing together texts that have never been discussed before but whose value for our understanding of the impact of war on the individual is very clear. *World War I from Local Perspectives* bears witness to the value of painstaking studies in archives and arduous field studies. It is to be hoped that it will stimulate further studies of local collections that have not yet seen the light of day.

**Jane Mattisson Ekstam**