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Daniel Swift’s meditation on grief, poetry, and the bombing campaigns of World War II traverses genre boundaries smoothly and inventively as he draws his readers into a moving blend of elegy, history, and literary criticism. The key to Swift’s text is the connection he sees between two traditions of “silence,” one that derides and denies poetry written during World War II and one that avoids the moral and material effects of the Allied bombing campaign upon both the crews of the bombers and the civilian populations of their targets below. After describing Churchill’s elision of Bomber Command in his May 13, 1945, victory speech, Swift inserts this gem from Richard Eberhart’s poem, “The Fury of Aerial Bombardment”: “History, even, does not know what is meant.” *Bomber County* chronicles Swift’s attempt to use poetry to tell history what was meant by the bombings of World War II.

Swift’s thread of connection between bombing and poetry seems at first idiosyncratic: his paternal grandfather was an English bomber pilot lost in 1943 while returning from a raid on Münster, and the language of grief (on tombstones, in memory books) for those killed in war turns inevitably towards poetic elegy. Swift transitions between a painstaking archival recovery of his grandfather’s career as a bomber and other archival materials that present the human dimensions of life in English and German cities affected by the bombings. The accumulation of emotional resonances and cognate patterns of psychological resilience and trauma become by book’s end a cogent argument for the ways that the poets surveyed chapter by chapter accomplish vital and aesthetically powerful work that assuages and intensifies the moral quandaries raised by the bombing campaigns and the staggering price paid by those who waged them and those who bore up under them.

Swift writes in the tradition of mixed genre artists like the late Nobel laureate Czeslaw Milosz, and his study benefits from other scholarly trends in the practice of everyday life (de Certeau) and so-called people’s histories (Zinn). Swift’s contribution to standard historical accounts of the bombing campaigns is the way his interweaving of family history imbues the more conventional texts he utilizes with
a moral seriousness and mournful gravitas that makes his philosophical conclusions more palatable and compelling. Swift moves from personal interviews with elderly German survivors of the bombing campaigns to excerpts from letters written by his father before or after the raids discussed in the interview. Both documentary and personal, Swift’s approach in *Bomber County* assaults the compartmentalization of strategy and humanity that underlay early assessments of bombing campaigns designed to attack the morale of civilian populations.

As literary criticism, *Bomber County* takes on the oft-repeated criticism that World War II produced no good poetry, a canard that draws its force from comparisons with the trench warfare poetry of World War I. In its mixing of academic, literary, and epistolary sources, *Bomber County* is most indebted to Paul Fussell’s classic work, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975). Swift draws on poems by W. H. Auden, Dylan Thomas, John Ciardi, T. S. Eliot, Randall Jarrell, Stephen Spender, C. Day Lewis, James Dickey, and many other lesser-known poets to illustrate his claim that the salient poetry of WWII concerns itself with the experience and execution of bombing. Swift argues that moral reticence regarding the bombings has caused historians and literary critics to shy away from acknowledging the ample materials, archival, and published, that testify to the peculiar aesthetic power of cities in pain. For the most part, Swift treats the poetry as documentary evidence rather than aesthetic experiences, and this leads to some unsettling insights, such as when he audaciously links Auden’s laconic description of Icarus’s fall into the sea with his grandfather’s plunge into the waters off of Holland after engaging a German night fighter on June 12, 1943.

Unlike A. C. Grayling’s more philosophical indictment of the bombings, *Among the Dead Cities* (2006) or Patrick Bishop’s more sympathetic history, *Bomber Boys* (2007), Swift strays freely across ideological dividing lines in pursuit of a more personal version of the bombing campaigns, one that encompasses both the suspense of pilots preparing day after day for a final bombing mission that is repeatedly cancelled due to weather conditions and the reminiscences of a German who had once been a boy collecting shrapnel in the streets of Cologne.

As literary criticism, the analyses of poetry in *Bomber County* are not fully developed, and the author’s purposeful manner of relating all events to the particular drama of his paternal grandfather means that the book does not purport to be anything other than a supplement to more standard histories. Instead, Swift targets a less specialized audience, readers for whom history and poetry are not separate fields of endeavor. *Bomber County*’s main value for such readers is to movingly depict the human dimensions of war in general and WWII bombing campaigns in specific, tracing the ripple effects of an individual soldier’s flight and death in his family history and in the landscape shaped by his ordnance.

Building upon Dylan Thomas’s assertion that “[a]fter the first death, there is no other,” Swift writes convincingly of the ways that grieving the war dead becomes an act of citation, a repetition that echoes the interchangeability of airmen in the type of modern warfare exemplified by massive bombing missions. He counterpoises this
assertion with carefully drawn portraits of wartime poets caught in the act of creation and with painstakingly recreated imaginations of his grandfather’s final weeks, largely based on the (interchangeable) memoirs of others who were members of the same units and events as Acting Squadron Leader James Eric Swift. Readers of this memoir/history/literary criticism will find it a moving meditation on the intimate relationship between families and war, between soldiers and the societies into whose memories they ineluctably and poetically return.


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In this short, readable volume, author Christopher Fettweis explores the prospects and implications for great power peace. Anticipating the obvious first reaction from skeptics—namely, that Norman Angell had attempted to show that war was futile, but his efforts were overshadowed by World Wars I and II—Fettweis postulates that “Angell was not so much wrong as merely ahead of his time.” According to Fettweis, that time may now have arrived. “It is possible,” he explains, “that war could be a thing of the past” (p. 6).

“Possible” is a maddeningly vague concept, however, and Fettweis does not actually prove anything. He bases his argument on faith. Indeed, there can be few other kinds of argument for most of the participants in this debate. As Fettweis notes, realists, in particular, cling to an almost religious belief that war and warfare is a permanent condition of the human race. Any work that argues the opposite is likely to have an equally religious quality. As such, Dangerous Times? speaks to the already converted, but is almost certain to be ignored by those adherents to a different credo.

That is lamentable. This book is worthy of serious consideration by a wide audience. Fettweis, an assistant professor of political science at Tulane, has a fighting chance of succeeding where others have failed for at least two reasons.

First, Fettweis is a gifted writer and a creative thinker. His Losing Hurts Twice as Bad was a serious book, far more so than its idiosyncratic title suggested, and this volume is more serious still. Fettweis begins by exploring why war and organized violence is on the decline. He then considers some of the leading arguments for why this might be a temporary condition (including possible future conflicts over natural resources) and he concludes with some specific proposals for what the end of great power conflict portends, especially for US foreign policy.

The second reason why Fettweis’s book might fare better than previous attempts to predict the end of great power war is because his claims and beliefs align with the