***Commemorative Modernisms: Women Writers, Death and the First World War.* Alice Kelly. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020. Pp. vi-297.**

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Friends with Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield read an early version of Woolf's novel *Night and Day*, and in a 1919 letter to her partner, John Middleton Murry, admonished Woolf for avoiding the First World War. "The war never has been, that is what [the novel's] message is," Mansfield wrote to Murry.[1] The novel then, she writes, "is a lie to the soul." She goes on to say, "I feel in the *profoundest* sense that nothing can ever be the same that as artists we are traitors if we feel otherwise: we have to take it into account and find new expressions new moulds for our new thoughts & feelings." Mansfield believed literature had a duty to engage with the mass death that resulted from the war. In her book *Commemorative Modernisms: Women Writers, Death and the First World War*, Alice Kelly uses Mansfield's quote from this letter as an epigraph. It is a fitting one because Kelly shows how modernist writers like Mansfield and Woolf influenced and built on each other's work in their representation of death.[2] Other writers included in the study are Hilda Doolittle (H.D.), Edith Wharton, and nurses who wrote letters and memoirs, all who, Kelly argues, represent death or engage with the public memorial culture that occurred in the aftermath of the First World War in their texts. These writers portray death and the changing attitudes towards death that came about as a result of what many consider to be a watershed global catastrophe.

Most literary scholars in the mid- to late twentieth century came to an agreement that the First World War was, as Vincent Sherry says, "the signal event" that led to the experimentation of literary Anglo-American modernism.[3] Earlier texts like *The Great War and Modern Memory* by Paul Fussell and *Rites of Spring* by

[1] Vincent O'Sullivan and Margaret Scott, eds., *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984-2008), 2:83.

[2] Alice Kelly, *Commemorative Modernisms: Women Writers, Death and the First World War* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020). Subsequent references are cited parenthetically.

[3] Vincent Sherry, "The Great War and Literary Modernism in England," in Vincent Sherry, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to The Literature of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 113-137.

Modris Eksteins saw the war as a turning point in the human psyche.[4] It was the shattering experience that paved the way for the fragmented style attributed to high modernism, according to these scholars. In the last few years, as scholarship has embraced a more interdisciplinary study of modernism, engaging with heterogenous modernisms instead of one homogenous literary movement, whilst "moving to a dramatically enlarged perception of the range and reach of cultural activity, including the wider geographic range,"[5] the distance between the First World War and modernism's defining experimentation has also grown. In *Commemorative Modernisms: Women Writers, Death and the First World War*, Kelly seeks to bring the two into closer proximity again and rethink the First World War's influence on literature and cultural memory (23).

Kelly's career thus far has focused on that very project. In this latest book, she examines the texts of women writers because women, Kelly claims, experienced the war differently than men (2). The book is thus a logical extension of Kelly's previous work, namely a critical edition of Wharton's war reportage, *Fighting France: From Dunkerque to Belfort* (1915). One chapter in *Commemorative Modernisms* is devoted to Wharton, whose realistic portrayals of the war Kelly sees as a precursor to the modernist war writing of H.D., Mansfield, and Woolf. In fact, the structure of the book follows what Kelly sees as the changing attitudes that occurred in women's writing during the war and in its aftermath.

In the first section of *Commemorative Modernisms*, Kelly analyzes texts by women who were physically close to the dying soldiers or the fields of battle, while the second section details the work of writers farther removed from the front lines. The third section focuses on the intersection between modernist writing and public memorial cultures. The book's structure provides a clear outline for navigating modernist women's literature's response to grief and mourning in twentieth-century British society and culture.

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[4] Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989).

[5] Michael Levenson, "Introduction," in Michael Levenson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 3.

The introductory chapter begins by providing a background on rituals and beliefs surrounding death in prewar culture. Kelly explains, for example, that the funeral practices and death rituals of the Victorian period, including extravagant funerals, funeral photography, and the length of time a loved one was able to sit with the dead, allowed for closure and consolation (6-7). In contrast, the First World War offered little consolation because of the new rituals that were a byproduct of war: the quickness of death, the length of time a loved one had to wait to hear about the death, and the fact some of the dead had to be buried abroad. Because of these changes, debates over how best to memorialize the dead ushered in the War Graves Commission, which, in turn, resulted in a culture of commemorative art and remembrance in the postwar period (9-11). This "new culture of commemoration" is "a crucial context for literary development in [the modernist] period," Kelly posits (28).

Chapter 1, "The Shock of the Dead: Deathbeds, Burial Rites and Cemetery Scenes in Nurses' Narratives" examines diaries and memoirs written by nurses, and argues that the women who served the dying soldiers had a unique position. Because of their proximity to the war, the nurses utilized "conservative literary tropes" in an effort to "dignify and memorialise" the dead (40). Unprepared for the massive death toll with which they were confronted, nurses turned to these traditional avenues of mourning and grief in an effort to cope with the shock of war (40). The strength of this chapter is the new interpretive possibility offered by Kelly's use of primary source materials such as nursing manuals and handbooks, along with eyewitness accounts written by the nurses. Analysis of First World War texts has tended to concentrate on eyewitness texts by the "soldier-poets": Wilfred Owen, Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon, and Rupert Brooke, among others.[6] As Kelly's work demonstrates, the direct experiences of the war written by women

[6] See, for some examples, Bernard Bergonzi, *Heroes' Twilight: A Study of the Literature of the Great War* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1965); Adrian Caesar, *Taking It Like a Man: Suffering, Sexuality and the War Poets: Brooke, Sassoon, Owen, Graves* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993); Daniel Hipp, *The Poetry of Shell Shock: Wartime Trauma and Healing in Wilfred Owen, Ivor Gurney and Siegfried Sassoon* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2005); Janis Stout, *Coming Out of War: Poetry, Grieving, and the Culture of the World Wars* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2005).

may assist scholars and other readers to reach a fuller understanding of war trauma and its effects on the society at large, not just on the men who saw combat.

More beneficial still, is that the texts Kelly focuses on in this first chapter were written by women in a variety of locations, such as Burma and the Gallipoli Peninsula, not just the Western Front (43), providing diverse perspectives on the war. These narratives are fascinating, because the "nurse's heavily gendered role and ambiguous military positioning was compounded by her contradictory roles of healer and griever, as well as participant and witness" (41). These texts highlight the inability of many nurses to console the dying. Deathbed scenes written by the nurses attempt to honor individual soldiers by using common characteristics, "highly sentimentalised and laden with pathos" (46), that earlier Victorian texts utilized in such scenes; however, the sheer number of deaths resulted in writing that is far too generalized for its purpose (47). The attempts at consolation failed. The chapter's textual evidence and analysis illustrate just how much traditional narrative modes were unable adequately to represent mass death (58) and, thus, paved the way for the modernist responses to the war written by H.D., Mansfield, and Woolf. However, Kelly identifies a group of nursing narratives that portray what she calls "anti-deathbed scenes" and that, in refusing to console, use "modernist form and content" to represent death (54).

In Chapter 2, entitled "Uncomfortable Propaganda: Edith Wharton's Wartime Writings," Kelly argues that Wharton's wartime output, from an uncollected short story to her nonfiction wartime writing, like that of some of the nurses in Chapter 1, utilizes conventional tropes to represent the dead, but that even in Wharton's realistic writings, traces of anxiety over the death toll appear. While Wharton's wartime writing is typically seen as mere propaganda, Kelly's careful analysis reveals a "literariness" to it that matches that of literary texts by the modernists (83). "Wharton's writing," Kelly argues, in fact "raises questions over how writers justified the war deaths of Allied soldiers in order to validate the Allied war cause, and how they dealt with the difficult moral question of the wartime necessity of killing the enemy" (82). This questioning played out again in texts by modernists like Woolf, and Kelly's analysis of these moments in Wharton's texts paves the way for the subsequent discussions in the chapters on H.D., Mansfield, and Woolf. Strains of modernism in Wharton's wartime texts are her experiments with literary

form, her portrayal of the intense anxiety caused by the war, and her use of ambiguity (104, 110, 112).

Because Wharton spent a good deal of time in France and visited the front as part of her work with charities like the American Hostels for Refugees, it is difficult to determine how much of the writing is reportage and how much of the writing is fictionalized, Kelly observes (85). The most significant analytical point in this chapter is the acknowledgement that Wharton's position as one of the most popular and well-known American writers allowed her access to the front and, therefore, to witness the war in ways that other writers could not (86). Kelly explains:

> In *Fighting France*, Wharton justifies and elides war death through the skillful use of stock propagandistic tropes: the suffering of innocent civilians and the ennobling and invigorating capacity of war experience. However, of most interest are the strange and unsettling encounters with the dead, which betray apprehension or even a marked anxiety about war death and the treatment of the dead, which undermine and disrupt this propagandistic text. (87)

Because the majority of scholars, such as Clare Tylee and Stanley Cooperman, have largely viewed Wharton's war writing as mere propaganda (86, 82), Kelly's argument helps us to see Wharton and her writing through the lens of her proximity to death and mourning, allowing for a clearer, more nuanced understanding of the complexities of women's responses to the war overall.

That said, aspects of Wharton's wartime writing remain problematic, as Kelly's examination of Wharton's use of atrocity and revenge narratives illustrates (97). Such stories repeated what we would call "misinformation" about war atrocities; however, in Wharton's story "Coming Home," which is characteristic of the revenge genre, Kelly claims that at the moment of death in the story, Wharton "provides a metafictional commentary on the composition of atrocity stories and revenge narratives, and the links between propaganda and narrative-making" (99). The chapter ends with Kelly unpacking "The Field of Honour," a story that shows Wharton wrestling with the gendering of the First World War, "the fear that women were profiting from the war, specifically from the suffering and deaths of

men" (109). This analysis ties back to one of Kelly's main arguments, which runs throughout the book: that women, seen as the chief mourners, used that position to consider their responsibilities to the war dead. Best known for her Gilded Age stories focused on New York's bourgeoisie, Wharton emerges from this chapter as a surprising and significant figure in war literature, forcing us to see more direct links between American literary realism and experimental Anglo-American modernism. The chapter on Wharton provides an easy transition from the first section of the book into the second, focused on the writers who did not have as close proximity to the war dead as the nurses and Wharton did.

Chapter 3, "Mansfield Mobilised: Katherine Mansfield, the Great War, and Military Discourse," is an extension of a piece Kelly originally published in *Modernist Cultures*, and it showcases her extensive knowledge of Mansfield, whose letters parody "military reportage" (121). This parodying, Kelly explains, is an example of "modernist experimentation" as a response to the scale of death during the First World War (121). By focusing in this chapter on Mansfield's letters instead of her short fictional output, Kelly illustrates how war saturated the daily lives of civilian women during the conflict and in its aftermath. She convincingly argues that Mansfield's use of military language is an effect of her anxiety over tuberculosis (135), and by doing so, Kelly enters the conversation with other recent scholars who see the war as more important to Mansfield's oeuvre than previous scholars did.[7]

Like Mansfield's use of militarized rhetoric to cope with personal trauma, H.D., too, turned to writing about the war to cope with traumatic personal experience, namely her 1915 pregnancy that ended with a stillbirth. In chapter 4, "The Civilian War Novel: H.D.'s Avant-Garde War Dead," H.D.'s novel *Bid Me to Live* is explored for its use of experimental modernist strategies and the relationship of those strategies to the war. An example of what Kelly calls "the civilian war novel," *Bid Me to Live* is a "personal wartime story" that is a response to "both individual and collective trauma" (155). Like Mansfield's letters, the novel presents the civilian experience of the war as one that blends and blurs the lines between, according to Kelly, the home front and the trenches, where H.D.'s

[7] Alice Kelly, "Introduction: Katherine Mansfield, War Writer," *Katherine Mansfield Studies* 6 (2014): 1-10.

husband, Richard Aldington fought as a soldier (154). In particular, H.D.'s use of military language to describe domestic spaces demonstrates how the civilian population was traumatized by the war (156-57). Kelly's strength in this chapter is her analysis of H.D.'s use of the female body to respond to the war dead. The stillbirth of the novel occurs during an air raid; the war then, in H.D.'s eyes, did not just destroy the men on the battlefields, it destroyed the domestic sphere, the space that had been typically seen as safe and secure (156). H.D. also uses space in what Kelly deems the most significant scene in the novel, when a group of soldiers attend a showing at a cinema (173). Kelly argues that the scene brings to mind Victorian funeral photography in the way it commemorates the dead (173), but she adds that H.D.'s representation of the cinema, a new technology, illustrates "a proleptic memorialisation of the soldiers, which links into the choice of the medium of film as an inherently historical medium: that what we see on the screen must, by necessity, already be past" (180). Kelly's blending of H.D.'s biography with historical and cultural context, as well as with analysis of modernist aesthetics, offers a complex understanding of women's traumatizing experiences of the war, and of how the psychological rupture it effected led to literary experimentation. Because of this, this chapter is the most successful in fulfilling Kelly's broader agenda to show how women writers exhibited shifting attitudes towards death.

In Chapter 5, "Modernist Memories: Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield in the Postwar World," modernist experiments in literary form collide with the "commemorative culture" that arose in the aftermath of the war. Kelly argues that Woolf and Mansfield, among other writers, engaged with arguments over how to best commemorate the dead which occurred throughout British society in the war's immediate aftermath, continuing up until the 1930s (196-97). Here, Kelly refers to pieces not just by Woolf and Mansfield, but also by E. M. Forster, Rudyard Kipling, and Christopher Isherwood. If these other writers indeed bring "into relief the particular tropes and techniques of Mansfield and Woolf" (196), it remains to be seen exactly what actually set Woolf, Mansfield, and women's modernism more broadly apart from the commemorative modernisms of those male authors. Kelly's suggestion that both Woolf and Mansfield dealt with female civilian responses to the war dead and to memorials fails to convince me that their engagement with commemorative culture is in any way significantly different from, for example, Kipling's engagement with tropes and themes of death,

mourning, and the aftermath of total war. I would argue, too, that Kelly is remiss in not mentioning T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* in this chapter. It, too, anxiously wrestles with death, especially in the first section, "The Burial of the Dead." However, the analysis of the "absent and consolatory bodies" in Woolf's and Mansfield's fiction (198) compellingly proves how death from the war becomes represented in their fiction, hinting at how women modernists reacted to the debates over how to memorialize the dead in ways that could be considered unique from their male counterparts.

In all, Kelly's book opens up the genre of Anglo-American First World War literature to a greater variety of texts, as well as a wider interpretation of the traditional war texts. The book also offers a new understanding of the war's connection with Anglo-American modernism. By specifically examining female civilian writers, Kelly's book effectively explores the complexity of war trauma and death. So little previous work, too, has connected literature with postwar commemorative culture, which is shocking, considering that the debate over how to mourn the dead was such an important topic in postwar British society. By neglecting a cultural moment that affected nearly every member of that society, Kelly shows us that such an absence in literary scholarship misses what was also a key moment in modernist culture. It is my hope that Kelly's book will initiate even more studies on the topic.