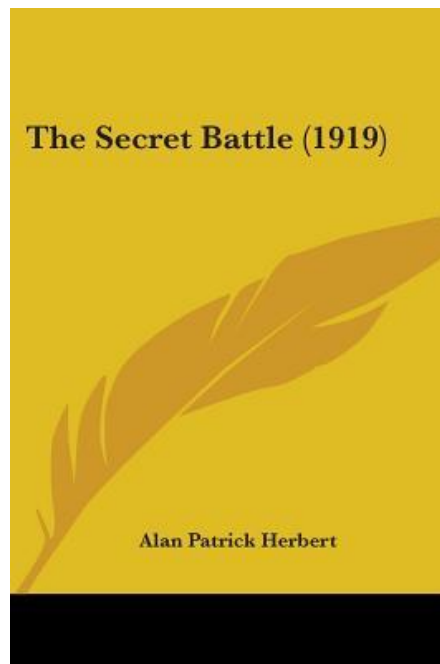




The Secret Battle

A.P. Herbert

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This novel follows a young officer from Gallipoli to France where he is participant in a tragedy.

The Secret Battle Details

Date : Published November 1st 2007 by Kessinger Publishing (first published 1919)

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Author : A.P. Herbert

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From Reader Review The Secret Battle for online ebook

John says

As a writer A.P. Herbert was known for his comic work. This, however, his first book, is an altogether darker affair.

The Secret Battle, published in 1919, might be the first of the British novels/memoirs of the First World War. It tells the story of a high strung young soldier called Harry Penrose who enlists in 1914 and is executed for cowardice in 1917. Herbert, who fought at Gallipoli and on the Western Front, vividly evokes the squalor of both theatres, more so than in some better known books. Penrose's slow approach to his inevitable fate is powerfully told.

In Britain much of what is generally believed about the First World War comes from the poems, plays, novels, and memoirs it produced (the latter categories indistinguishable in some cases). The notion of 'shot at dawn' is particularly widespread; of shell-shocked men being summarily shot for cowardice by a brutal military. This book lends much weight to that. Indeed, there was a man, Sub-Lieutenant Edwin Dyett, in Herbert's regiment who was shot for cowardice in 1917 and the circumstances of the case certainly raise the eyebrows of a civilian reader a century later.

But, if Herbert is telling Dyett's story, he certainly does so with plenty of poetic licence. And, as John Terraine explains in his excellent introduction, capital punishment was very rare in the British Army in World War One.

The Secret Battle is far better than some better known books. But, with the blend of memoir and novel which that war's literature generated, the reader must always question which, exactly, they are reading.

Senna Black says

The Secret Battle, a 1919 book by A. P. Herbert, available free at Project Gutenberg. It is fairly short, but very well worth it for the amazing descriptions of the struggles, both petty and major, experienced by junior officers in Gallipoli and France. It is written as a sort of fictional memoir from the point of view of a narrator, who is writing to set the record straight about his friend, Harry Penrose. The story is a protest against the mercilessness of the military machine, and does a very effective job of showing that Penrose has been failed by the system. Winston Churchill called it,

“One of those cries of pain wrung from the fighting troops ... like the poems of Siegfried Sassoon [it] should be read in each generation, so that men and women may rest under no illusions about what war means.”

A. P. Herbert was probably partly inspired by the case of Edwin Dyett, whose fate apparently haunted him. It is difficult to talk about this story without spoiling the ending (and you may be able to guess what happens), but I'm going to try because I think knowing probably changes the way you read from the beginning. However, most reviews will discuss the ending of the story, so be warned.

The Secret Battle is also closely based on Herbert's own wartime experiences, with some scenes being drawn directly from his memory. Penrose also bears some similarity to Herbert, who was also midway through his Oxford education when war broke out, enlisted, and was eventually pressured by his relatives into applying for a commission. It is interesting that Herbert based Penrose's background on himself, distancing the

fictional him from the narratorial “I”. I suspect all young officers would have heard about Dyett and reflected on how close they themselves could have come to being in his position. The descriptions, particularly those of the Gallipoli campaign, are so evocative they will instantly provoke sympathy with what the men suffered in terms of uncertainty, heat, cold, flies and vermin, exposure, sickness and the inevitable strain on nerves that this hardship produced.

The narrator first meets Penrose on the ship to Gallipoli, and then they are consistently in the same company with him for the rest of the war. Penrose starts out as a curious, determined officer who inspires his troops and tries very hard to serve the battalion well. The traits that will ultimately lead to Penrose’s downfall are explored by the narrator from the beginning. He is an idealist and suffers from an excess of imagination, which over time makes it increasingly difficult for him to cope with the stress and trauma of leading men in combat. Penrose is in many ways a tragic figure, whose fatal flaw is his need to be brave and “do the right thing”. This leads him to stay at Gallipoli even when he is crippled with dysentery, and later leads him to return to France twice despite the recognition of his contribution and the prospect of an honourable retirement from the field of war. Even when he is manifestly mentally unfit, and he, his wife and the narrator all recognise it, he still chooses to return to his battalion. Like all tragic heroes, Penrose is a victim of his own nature (which is in many ways admirable) and a set of circumstances which the strengths of a civilian into tragic weaknesses.

This is juxtaposed (perhaps unintentionally) with the narrator, who is with Penrose most of the time and who nonetheless seems not to suffer the way Penrose did. He isn’t crippled with dysentery, he isn’t tortured by neurasthenia, is periodically shown to be progressing up the ranks, serving for a while as adjutant, and doesn’t make incidental enemies the way Penrose does. The contrast with the narrator made me ultimately feel that part of Penrose’s problem was that he was fundamentally unsuited for war, but the pressure of expectations and his own nature made it impossible for him to bear stepping out of combat and accepting a civilian position. This in many ways strengthens the argument of the book, because it also goes to the immense social pressure to “do their bit” brought to bear on young men who had been pushed beyond their endurance.

This story is worth reading. It is very thought-provoking and quite haunting, and A. P. Herbert’s autobiographical inclusions make it a phenomenal primary source on the experience of junior officers in its own right, their duties and struggles, and the way they interacted with their men, each other, and their commanders. It is also flat-out the best description I have read so far of the experience of the Gallipoli campaign.

AskHistorians says

Herbert would become better known later in his career as a humourist, but this early novel received wide acclaim upon its release even if it did not find a similarly robust market. Offers an account of Gallipoli, among other things.

Suz says

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Chris says

War sucks.

If there's a central message to this book, that's it: war sucks. There is no glory in war. War may be inevitable, it may even be necessary, but it is not good and it is not glorious. And no one who goes into war ever comes out unscathed.

This book was first published in 1919, soon after the war it depicts, World War One. While it is a fictional story, the tale of a young British officer named Harry Penrose, it is based on the experiences of the author and other men who served in the British army during that war. And those experiences are, in a word, hellish. From the dusty death-traps of Gallipoli to the battlefields in France, there is nothing good about being involved in this war. Penrose is painted as a kind of ideal soldier - someone who volunteered for the war, who still has some romantic ideals about service, and honestly tries to be the best officer he can. He cares for his men, he loves his country and he does his duty.

And what does he get as a reward? Crippling dysentery, the loss of nearly all his friends, and an eventual court-martial and execution. The war eats Harry Penrose alive, and doesn't give a damn what kind of person he is. The life of a soldier in wartime destroys good men and, if the narrator is to be trusted, often leaves the bad ones to be promoted in the ranks.

This book must have been a shocker when it was published, because it tries to paint the life of a soldier as truthfully and bluntly as possible. The discomfort, the boredom, the tiny, petty antagonisms that drive men mad in the trenches, all of these are the reality of war. Even getting to the point where men put themselves in harm's way, not because they are brave and noble, but because death is the only release they're even going to get from their service in this war.

It's also a criticism of certain army practices, especially the death penalty for deserters. The end of the book details Harry's court-martial for desertion and execution by his own men, and why it never should have happened. The author points out, through his characters, that there comes a certain point where a man just breaks. No matter how strong his nerve or how deep his devotion, there are limits to the amount of punishment one person's spirit can endure, but soldiers are expected to have limitless reserves. A soldier who balks, or disobeys orders he knows are dangerous to himself and his men are considered cowards by people *who have no idea what he is going through*, and the consequences can be tragic.

Even if a man should come through the war with all his limbs and a few friends left, he will never be rid of it. The memories, the dreams, even the compulsion to return to the battlefield are all there. Laced throughout the book is the idea of a soldier's duty to the war, and the incredibly, almost irrationally strong hold it can have. Penrose has, at several times during the book, an opportunity to take himself out of harm's way, and deservedly so. No one would have faulted him for taking a job away from the front line or being hospitalized for nearly terminal dysentery. But his sense of "duty" overrides logic, and he throws away his health, his marriage and his life for, essentially, nothing.

If there's one thing I cannot stand about the military - and there are several, but this is the big one - it's the complete disregard for the well-being of the soldiers who risk their lives based on some elevated sense of "duty." These men and women are drilled with romantic views of "a soldier's duty" and the idea that, without them, we'd be the Islamic Republic of America by now. They are told that they are special, they are *warriors*.... If they manage to survive their service, having done their duty, what is their reward? If they're *lucky*, they come out of it with bad dreams and memories.

Humans have been fighting each other for thousands of years, and most of the time the soldiers who are

actually killing and dying are not the ones who wanted the war. They are proxies for rich and powerful men who are angry at other rich and powerful men who are too afraid or can't be bothered to do their own fighting. And in those thousands of years, we have *never* figured out how to properly deal with those soldiers who survive their wars. They're given a pat on the back, maybe a medal and a little money, and told, "Go have a normal life. Thanks a bunch."

But if you're a soldier, "a normal life" just isn't going to happen.

It was true in World War One, and it's just as true now. Good people go to war for noble reasons, and what they get out of it is a lifetime of nightmares, pain and a big "Fuck you" from the government that told them how noble and important they were.

Steelwhisper says

Proof of the fact that as early as that people grasped the meaning of shell-shock/PTSD and how much the army doctrines were resented.

Epictetus says

Outstanding.

An account of life of an infantry officer of the Great War, as literature but based on personal experience. The book was said to have influenced Churchill and other profoundly. It deals with how a brave, dutiful officer can nonetheless end up being shot for cowardice. It explores some aspects of the social and psychological sides of warfare and also the managerial politics. (It would be nice to think that Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and other British politicians of the current generation had read this before sending men into what they called "wars of choice.")

Apart from the subject matter, the writing is good—clear, unambiguous, and firing the imagination.

One might compare Herbert's *The Secret Battle* to Ford's *Parade's End*. Herbert's work is shorter, drier but equally sympathetic and intelligent.

The last phrase in this book is one that will stay in my mind, I believe, for as long as I live.

Ian says

A powerful and moving account of the life of a junior infantry officer during the Great War. Published in 1919 the novel draws on Herbert's own experiences in the conflict. Although the narrative can sometimes feel a little dated by modern standards it has an immediacy that is obviously informed by recent experience.

As the action moves from Gallipoli to the Somme it vividly portrays the physical and mental stresses of modern warfare. Neither does it shy away from the establishment's lack of understanding of the problems

men in the trenches faced.

There's a certain doomed inevitability to the ending that leaves the reader saddened.

Paul says

I found this as powerful on its second reading, years after the first time I opened it, as it was then. It's a timeless masterpiece about the effects of war on a sensitive, educated young officer. The narrative is unadorned and simple, as a friend tells of the battle within the victim-hero overwhelmed by the nightmare of the First World War. He struggles with his suffering until his actions to save himself and his men are tragically misunderstood. Gripping, insightful and a must-read classic.

Barbara says

This was very good. It really seemed more like a memoir than a novel--I wonder to what degree it was autobiographical? It really gave me a sense of what Gallipoli must have been like, as well as how men must have dealt with fear. A heart-breaking, but not unexpected, ending
