

Death's Men: Soldiers of the Great War. By Denis Winter. (Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, 1978. Pp. 1 + 274. Acknowledgements, Map, Notes, References. USA \$5.95.)

Death's Men is a stirring account of the First World War, at the time called The Great War, by the men on the ground during the fighting. Most books on the war are told from the perspective of the governments and countries involved. Denis Winter gets down in the trenches with the men fighting for those countries and those governments. Denis Winter studied history at Pembroke College, Cambridge. Death's Men was his first book.

The book begins with Winter's acknowledgements to all those that helped him gather the information. This is helpful because it gives a long list of institutions where Winter studied and found soldier's own words to use throughout the text. There is also a map preceding the text. The map is of the West Front 1914-1918, and it has all the same battle lines that many other World War One map would have. Winter uses this almost as an overview to where he is heading with his following chapters. This is the last big picture that Winter will use involving the war.

The introduction explains in broad generalizations the essence of the First World War. Winter also uses it to show the bonds that would be built between brothers in arms and from those bonds he attempts to show the rationale of the British fighting men in France during the Great War. The early chapters following are used mainly to give the sense of patriotic urgency that Britain was dealing with as Kitchener called for volunteers. Once the volunteers are in Winter follows them through the adjustment to military life. All the changes are addressed from the training of the officers to that of the "Other Ranks".

With the chapter “Off to France” Winter cuts the ties not only with the home island of many of these soldiers but the ties with a way of life that the soldiers do not know is ending. Once in France soldiers would face the trench life. Winter uses many different types of first hand testimony to the conditions that the men faced in such a life.

As if the reader was also a new recruit, Winter leads into detail of the weapons that were used in trench warfare as well as what is expected of the soldiers themselves. Once through a few skirmishes the reader is allowed to take leave with the soldiers on what Winter calls, “Into Rest”. This is where Winter’s collection of memoirs and first hand accounts compare and contrast the most. Some soldiers were closer to larger cities and had more access to more means of rest and relaxation. Others were forced to spend their “rest” in rest camps set up by the army. These were little better than being in the trenches. This also illustrates the difference in ranks and social class not only between the soldiers at rest but also how the French people viewed the English soldiers.

Following “rest”, Winter details what it was for soldiers to be granted “Home Leave”. This was of little use to those Scottish soldiers since they would have to return as soon as they arrived at home if they lived in the highlands. The main point of this chapter is to bring the fighting man back face to face with a world that has no idea what the fighting is like in France. Winter notes that most of the soldiers felt very different towards their homeland after fighting and then returning on leave. Some wished they had stayed in France with their time off.

After home leave it is back to the front. Winter once again utilizes the voices of those that experienced it to do the strongest talking. Death’s Men carries stunning detail of what it meant to “go over” the wall of the trench and enter No-Man’s land, to lead an

offensive or a counter-offensive into the unknown towards the often unseen enemy. The gamut of emotions is run complete for every soldier that Winter quotes. The agonizing final minutes of friends and mates are played out from the men who saw it happen.

The physical and mental strain of battle is only partly relieved by the aftermath. Most have duties to take care of as soon as the strike has ended, or more often times failed. There are rolls called that Winter uses poignantly. Winter also follows some of the wounded off the battle field and into the hospitals. Again, first hand accounts of patients, nurses, and even doctors, paint a grim picture of what this war actually was. Winter also addresses some more of the social class roles that played into being wounded. He also shows that this war was slowly becoming a great equalizer among those trained as officers and those trained as Other Ranks.

Following the battles and the care of the wounded Winter looks into the attitudes of the enemy. He starts out with the propaganda that kept the Germans always feared. He follows that into the fear of the unknown or unseen, for as most of his sources go, no one had seen very many Germans. He then ends up with a kind of respect for how well the German's fought, held together and/or faced death.

Winters next to final chapter on "Attitudes towards the war as a whole" gets down to more of what Winter is writing for. Winter is trying to give the men that were in the trenches, facing combat a voice that will finally compare and be heard over those of the men who weren't there and didn't face it. Winter writes, "Non-combatant spokesmen at home wrote nonsense each and every one" (223). He writes from the letters and recollections of old veterans and young officers. Each account has its different feelings towards the war and all from different backgrounds. The one common thing that showed

was the acceptance of fate was generally well among the fighting men. Winter points out that they didn't see much point to being where they were but they were going to do the best job they could since they were there.

Death's Men touches briefly on the goings on after the war. Mostly Winter follows soldiers back to their daily routines, some back to their mail posts or factory jobs, others would opt for a change of pace since the war was over. The main theme of the final chapter is to follow the families of those after the war and even after many veterans have died. Winter mentions artifacts and monuments that will seemingly always survive and trenches that even though are filled run like scars throughout the countryside. What he tries to do with this book is to give the common soldier's words a place to stand beside the pictures, the battlements, the shrapnel, and the war memorials. Any student of history knows what the countries of the world paid, bought and sold, during the first world war, what they may not know is what Denis Winter is trying to show. He is trying to introduce the world to Death's Men.