

Review of *And Half the Seed of Europe: A Genealogy of the Great War, 1914-1918*, by Christopher Blake, (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2017). 151 pages, \$25.

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“War” is a term with so many negative connotations: how can we be eager to talk about any aspect of war when the number of casualties can at times easily exceed the population of an entire country? Do we really like reading about wars? Do we like to learn why countries wage war against other countries assumed to be enemies? Unless it is necessary, war is a crime. “Necessity” is actually a very relevant term and obviously it would differ based on the perspective you have. Should the assassination of an Austrian king lead all of Europe to erupt with wars on different fronts? It is WWI we are talking about at this point. Though it is a War that was fought on multiple fronts, historians mainly tend to talk about the Western front and the Eastern front. Though WWI was fought mainly on the European Continent, we see the United Kingdom conscripted minors from Australia and New Zealand to fight the war in Gallipoli. Why did so many countries serve as actors in this war? The responses would undoubtedly vary based on different factors. However, most importantly, was it worth sacrificing “half the seed of Europe”?

Up until the year 1914, our world did suffer from many wars but none of those were identified as world wars due to the fact that they were regional and none of them had as many devastating effects. How can one put into oblivion the trench wars in western Europe and in Gallipoli? However, after the Great War broke out in 1914 (commonly referred to as First World War or WWI), it was expected that it was the war to put an end to all conflicts across the globe, an irony very rightfully pointed out by Blake in his book *And Half the Seed of Europe*. Blake does not necessarily consider himself to be an historian, but has an extensive background in education and religious studies and hence his approach to this Great War is highly unique. Blake does examine the genealogy of the Great War almost 100 years after it ended, examining the way it left mourning homeless families falling apart and suffering from the invisible injuries of war.

When historians write, they tend to forget the “human” aspects, but focus instead on the war and the strategies employed by all countries involved. Also, historians sometimes run the risk of dwelling more on the facts and avoiding the social, political and even ideological implications. And hence comes the distinction between history books and “War Literature.”

WWI was fought in two fronts: the Western and the Eastern, meaning the descendants of the families that suffered from these fierce battles have inherited some memoirs and letters, some memorable items and perhaps, and most importantly, the tombstones that reveal so much about their ancestors. Those bodies have been laid to rest for a cause that some were not even aware of and all were expected to follow orders regardless of the situation; what their country expected from them was to kill or die. So, they all had their stories and as Blake writes, “Their story is part of ours, too. It is one that teaches us that

the past is at the heart of our present, and that our present will be handed on, for better or worse, to our children and their children.”

Though the title of the book is inspired by a line from Wilfred Owen’s poem “The Parable of the Old Man and the Young” dating from 1918, the bits and pieces of recollections shared by Blake’s father laid the foundation for this excellent work. *And Half the Seed of Europe* thus also functions as an instrument for paying respect and tribute, not only to Blake’s ancestors who fought in the Great War, but to all their comrades and all people who lost their lives.

Blake, it must be said, has written a genealogy: it’s not a history book in the normal sense of the term. Yet the history is very real. Historical events are carefully blended in with stories told by prominent family members and hence a work of “war literature” is created in a unique way that makes it appealing not only to historians but to those in other disciplines such as social sciences or the humanities. It’s an homage to the fallen whether they are laid to rest at home or away from home: the sun will rise and set at different times on them all, and the Great War will be evaluated differently. Similar to the way Blake expresses his thoughts on the fallen soldiers, so did Thomas Hardy in his poem “The Drummer Hodge” published in 1899:

Yet portion of that unknown plain
Will Hodge for ever be;
His homely Northern breast and brain
Grow up a Southern tree,
And strange-eyed constellations reign
His stars eternally.

Each chapter in the book is poignantly devoted to a person related to the author, yet a chapter that could be considered very unique would be chapter six (“Gas! Gas! Quick Boys!”), in which Blake mentions Fritz Haber who is known as “the father of chemical warfare.” The irony here lies in the fact that while, during the war, innumerable lives were lost due to gas, even among the Germans, later on Haber dedicated his work in chemistry on nitrogen and hydrogen to improving ammonia-based fertilizers that helped enhance agriculture in Europe. After the War, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Chemistry for the invention of the Haber-Bosch Process that would revolutionize agriculture (Blake 2017, 74).

And Half the Seed of Europe is an elegantly composed book of history written in the mode of historical fiction in the sense that you can read it like a novel composed of chapters unified around a single topic. The style of the narrative creates a sense of curiosity and hence it becomes a book any reader would want to read. Genealogy, when written as a plain narrative, will likely not appeal to those who have no relations to the people involved in the research conducted, but Blake very successfully combines genealogy with the events of WWI in such a way that the reader not only learns important lessons about this sometimes forgotten war, but also hears real war stories told by real people.