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War + Ink: New Perspectives on Ernest Hemingway’s Early Life and Writings

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WAR + INK

New Perspectives on Ernest Hemingway’s Early Life and Writings

Edited by
Steve Paul, Gail Sinclair, and Steven Trout

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To Carol, John, and Maniphone

With great appreciation for their love and support

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INTRODUCTION

STEVE PAUL, GAIL SINCLAIR, AND STEVEN TROUT

Ernest Hemingway was not yet nineteen years old when he both launched his writing career and absorbed the brutal force of war into body and soul. Fresh out of high school, the kid from Oak Park, Illinois, landed in what might seem the unlikeliest of places. First came his apprenticeship in a smoky Kansas City newsroom, which introduced Hemingway to the gritty underbelly of an ambitious crossroads burg and, perhaps, inspired his first serious reflections on the artistic potentialities of a stripped-down, unflinchingly direct literary style. Then came Fossalta on the Piave River in Italy, where on July 8, 1918, a machine-gun bullet and the fragments of a trench-mortar shell ripped into the teenager’s flesh, giving him firsthand experience of military violence—and a traumatic intimation of mortality—that would play a significant role in the writing to come. Comprised of eighteen original essays, War + Ink reimagines the Hemingway of the World War I era—the cub reporter as well as the thrill-seeking Red Cross volunteer and the wounded war hero—and then focuses on the writer’s life and works in the 1920s, arguably his most fruitful decade.

Hemingway’s early adulthood (1917–1929) was marked by his work as a journalist, the war, marriage, conflicts with parents, expatriation, and his struggles to make inroads as a writer of stories and novels that would get him noticed. This might seem like overly familiar scholarly territory. However, while numerous critics have recounted Hemingway’s personal journey through the 1910s and 1920s, our understanding of the young Hemingway and his early writings continues to evolve. And there is still much more to learn. This collection, which presents work by veteran and emerging Hemingway scholars alongside that of experts in related fields (including social and cultural historians of the Great War and researchers
in American Studies), breaks important new ground in four ways: first, by reframing Hemingway’s formative experiences in Kansas City; second, by establishing a fresh set of contexts for his Italian adventure in 1918 and his novels and stories of the 1920s; third, by offering some provocative reflections on Hemingway’s fiction and the issue of truth telling in war literature; and fourth, by reexamining Hemingway’s later career (and later works, such as *Across the River and into the Trees* and *The Fifth Column*) in terms of themes, issues, or places tied to the writer’s early life. The essays vary in terms of methodology, theoretical assumptions, and scope; what they share is an eagerness to question—and to look beyond—truisms that have long prevailed in Hemingway scholarship.

Nearly sixty years have passed since any Hemingway biographer spent more than a few pages exploring the writer’s time in Kansas City. This scholarly oversight, which the first two essays in this collection seek to correct, has arguably handicapped our understanding of America’s most important twentieth-century writer. As Charles A. Fenton put it (back in 1954):

> From Kansas City Hemingway took with him not only the lessons he had learned about writing but also a trained reporter’s eye which would enable him to profit considerably more from his Italian experiences than if, for example, he had been able to enlist directly from high school the previous June. He took with him too a reservoir of material upon which he could draw when he began his serious writing in 1919. . . . Those had been seven lucky months in 1917 and 1918; Hemingway had made the most of them. (49)

And he would go on making the most of them. As several of the essays in this volume demonstrate, Kansas City is a surprisingly ubiquitous place—and signifier—in Hemingway’s short fiction and novels. The Kansas City period has a direct connection to at least two of his full-length short stories (“A Pursuit Race” and “God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen”), and its echoes can be heard in works ranging from the often cryptic vignettes that comprise the original version of *in our time* (1924) to, as Matthew Nickel reveals in his contribution to this volume, *Across the River and into the Trees* (1950), a late text that seems, at first sight, far removed from the American Midwest. That Jake Barnes, the central character in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), is a wounded veteran of the war and an expatriate journalist from
Kansas City is no small marker of literary identity. And note that Harold Krebs, the jaded former doughboy in “Soldier’s Home” (1925), reads the *Star* in the midst of his mother’s infantilizing attack; by the end of the story, he plans to light out for—where else?—the rowdy metropolis where Hemingway first began to hone his craft. Kansas City and the “War to End All Wars” emerge as curiously braided topics in Hemingway’s writings from the 1920s—or perhaps not so curiously since his exposure to war began not with his overseas service in the Red Cross but with his apprenticeship at the *Star*, a publication on the front lines, as it were, of Middle America’s struggle to understand a global conflagration. For Hemingway, war and ink went together from the start.

Thus, this collection opens, appropriately enough, with Steve Paul’s “Hemingway in Kansas City: The True Dope on Violence and Creative Sources in a Vile and Lively Place.” As Paul demonstrates through a detailed comparison of chapter VIII of the 1925 *In Our Time* with a four-paragraph news item published by the *Star* on November 19, 1917 (one month after the young reporter’s arrival in the newsroom), Kansas City can be found deep within the lower portion of the “proverbial iceberg” formed by Hemingway’s art. This incisive essay shows us that from the mean streets of a wide-open town—and the pages of its newspaper, dripping with crime and violence—Hemingway soaked up far more in the way of artistically useful incidents, characters, and themes than most scholars have ever suspected. The next essay, John J. Fenstermaker’s “Ernest Hemingway, 1917–1918: First Work, First War,” reexamines the Kansas City period in terms of the young writer’s aggressive efforts to establish his image as a hard-boiled man of the world. Through a close reading of Hemingway’s letters to his parents and sisters in 1917 and 1918, Fenstermaker traces the teenager’s discovery of his “power . . . to present himself as he wished to be seen.” Indeed, in the exaggeration-filled missives that he mailed from Kansas City, and subsequently from the war zone of Northern Italy, Hemingway first reveled in what would become a lifelong obsession—“creating, controlling, and sustaining his public persona.”

Hemingway’s experiences in Europe in 1918 have, of course, already attracted considerable scholarly attention—far more, certainly, than the Kansas City connection. Over the past several decades, biographers such as Carlos Baker, Michael Reynolds, and James Mellow have excavated the micro-details of Hemingway’s rather mundane service as a volunteer
ambulance driver (on a scenic but quiet stretch of the Italian front); his subsequent foray into Italian positions along the Piave River (a far more hazardous sector); and his traumatic wounding on July 8, an event long mythologized (not least of all by the author himself). Information about Hemingway’s wartime love affair with Agnes Von Kurowsky largely eluded the biographical dragnet until the appearance of Henry Villard and James Nagel’s *Hemingway in Love and War: The Lost Diary of Agnes Von Kurowsky* in 1989. Since then, this important relationship has likewise been scrutinized by a small army of scholars. *War + Ink* offers little in the way of juicy revelations about what Hemingway did (or did not do) during his Italian adventure. Instead, part 2 of this collection brings the subject of Hemingway and the Great War up to date by situating the writer’s wartime experiences within a set of contexts that reflects new historical perspectives on America’s first global conflict (and the global pandemic that spread from the war’s training camps and battlefields).

The opening essay in this section, Susan Beegel’s “Love in the Time of Influenza: Hemingway and the 1918 Pandemic,” reminds us that Hemingway’s first serious romance occurred amid war *and* terrifying disease. Beegel traces the impact of the Spanish flu (the cause of between fifty to one hundred million deaths worldwide) on the two lovers; on Hemingway’s family back in Oak Park; and ultimately on *A Farewell to Arms*, which indirectly evokes the pandemic in its tragic conclusion. No one who reads this compelling essay will think about Hemingway or the year 1918 in the same way again. Jennifer Keene’s contribution, “Hemingway: A Typical Doughboy,” likewise frames Hemingway’s overseas experience in a way that allows us to see features that have long hidden in plain sight. For Keene, a social historian, Hemingway’s wartime behavior—his eagerness to volunteer (though not as an enlisted man), souvenir hoarding, touristy glee in the midst of famous places, and pride over having received a red badge of courage—bears a strong resemblance to that of other American servicemen. Even when lauded as exceptional, as the youngest American to be wounded on an exotic front, Hemingway was, we see, very much a young man of his time.

Ellen Andrew Knodt’s essay, “Pleasant, Isn’t It?: The Language of Hemingway and His World War I Contemporaries,” makes the same point but in a different way—namely, by comparing Hemingway’s wartime letters with correspondence penned by various members of the American Expedition-
ary Forces. Here again, a fresh context brings a surprising conclusion, as Hemingway’s penchant for “irony, understatement, and euphemism” proves to be characteristic of his generation. Indeed, in example after example, Knodt places us in the company of World War I soldiers (and servicewomen) who actually sound like Hemingway. This provocative essay both establishes the linguistic milieu from which the famous Hemingway style emerged and, in the process, helps to explain the popularity of that style. From the start, we discover Hemingway and his contemporary readers shared a specific language of war. Thus, it is little wonder that his terse, neo-sardonic form of expression resonated with his original audience.

Part 3 of War + Ink shifts our attention from the teller to the tale, offering innovative ways of reading Hemingway’s early fiction. Jennifer Haytock’s essay, “Looking at Horses: Destructive Spectatorship in The Sun Also Rises,” demonstrates that even one of Hemingway’s most intensely—and, one would think, most exhaustively—analyzed texts acquires new meaning once viewed through a fresh theoretical lens. Drawing upon Martin Harries’s recent study of “destructive spectatorship” (that is, the notion pervasive in modern art that one risks annihilation like Lot’s wife by gazing directly at disaster), Haytock approaches Jake Barnes and Brett Ashley as characters who cannot look back at the historical cataclysm that maimed them both. Thus, in contrast with critics who have emphasized the Great War’s sinister ubiquity in The Sun Also Rises, via the text’s copious allusions (obscure and otherwise) to the events of 1914 to 1918, Haytock recasts the novel as one peopled by characters who are engaged in a modernist flight from history—characters who cannot turn their faces to the past lest they become reduced to the metaphorical equivalents of pillars of salt. How much Hemingway’s own gaze took in when fixed on the killing fields of the Italian Front serves as the focus for Patrick Quinn and Steven Trout’s contribution, “Idealism, Deadlock, and Decimation: The Italian Experience of World War I in Ernest Hemingway’s A Farewell to Arms and Emilio Lussu’s Sardinian Brigade.” Through a detailed comparison of Hemingway’s text with Lussu’s novel, a deeply autobiographical work shaped by its author’s participation in some of the bloodiest campaigns of the Italian theater, Quinn and Trout assert that A Farewell to Arms offers both an accurate “anatomy of everything that was wrong with the Italian Army in World War I” and a precise diagnosis of “the cultural maladies that would produce Italian fascism in the war’s aftermath.” Informed by recent scholarship on the Italian
front and the origins of fascism, especially Mark Thompson’s *The White War* (2008) and R. J. B. Bosworth’s *Mussolini’s Italy* (2007), this essay marks the first time that anyone has discussed *A Farewell to Arms* alongside what is generally regarded as the finest Italian novel of the Great War. Similarly groundbreaking, Matthew Forsythe’s essay, “The Fragmented Origins of Ernest Hemingway’s ‘A Natural History of the Dead’” rounds out this section with a tour-de-force analysis of a work often neglected in studies of Hemingway’s war writing. Drawing upon manuscripts in the Hemingway Collection at the JFK Library, Forsythe traces the evolution of this strange, genre-defying piece—is it a short story incongruously married to a parody? or something more?—and then offers a close reading that underscores the artistic integrity of Hemingway’s design. From this revelatory analysis, “A Natural History of the Dead” emerges as one of Hemingway’s most important, if unsettling, statements on war, suffering, and death.

As evidenced by the number of articles that it has recently attracted in *The Hemingway Review* and elsewhere, “Soldier’s Home” (1925) is perhaps the richest—certainly, the most timely—of Hemingway’s early short stories. We know that the author himself rated it highly, referring to “Soldier’s Home” at least once as “the best short story I ever wrote” (*Selected Letters* 139). Thus, a collection focused on Hemingway in the 1910s and 1920s would be incomplete without a cluster of essays devoted to this quintessential narrative of an American soldier’s homecoming and difficult readjustment. All three essays in part 4 of *War + Ink* tackle the ambiguities of this work, but in very different ways. In “A Way It Never Was: Propaganda and Shell Shock in ‘Soldier’s Home’ and ‘A Way You’ll Never Be,’” Celia Kingsbury recasts “Soldier’s Home” as a story less about the traumatizing effects of physical violence than about the baleful influence of official lies. An expert on World War I propaganda, Kingsbury reminds us just how ubiquitous deliberate falsehood became in 1917 and 1918—as public relations czars like George Creel, head of the Orwellian Committee on Public Information, sought by any means possible (ethical or otherwise) “to convert every man, woman, and child in the U.S. to the war effort.” Kingsbury provides an overview of what Creel called “the world’s greatest adventure in advertising” and then traces the shattering impact of propaganda on Krebs, whose homecoming is complicated and made torturous by his discovery that the “truth is nowhere.” The next essay, William Blazek’s “All Quiet on the Midwestern Front: ‘Soldier’s Home,’” offers
a quite different diagnosis for Krebs’s malady. According to Blazek, a deep but unexpressed sense of fear prevents the protagonist’s community from fully embracing him—a fear born of their realization that the once-docile son of devout Methodists has returned from Europe a hardened killer and a sexual threat. This interpretation might seem a stretch; however, Blazek submits “Soldier’s Home” to one of the closest readings it has ever received and successfully locates multiple details that support his thesis. This provocative essay will inspire readers to revisit a story that they only thought they knew. And so too will Daryl Palmer’s “Hemingway’s ‘Soldier’s Home’: The Kansas Welcome Association, Abbreviations, and World War I Archives.” An original analysis that excavates a rich load of long-forgotten cultural associations, Palmer’s essay pays particular attention to the first two sentences of the story, which describe Krebs’s prewar identity as a student and fraternity house brother at a “Methodist college in Kansas.” What might this precise and obviously freighted piece of background information mean? To answer that question, Palmer turns to a variety of primary sources, including 1917 vintage college yearbooks (from Methodist schools in Kansas, of course) and the records of the Kansas Welcome Association, an organization committed (ironically enough) to making returning soldiers with ties to the Sunflower State feel at home.

Throughout many of these essays, we see Hemingway resolutely—at times, even courageously—standing up for truth. In “Soldier’s Home,” as Kingsbury argues, he exposed and implicitly denounced the pernicious fictions of wartime propaganda. And in A Farewell to Arms, as Quinn and Trout demonstrate, he turned Mussolini’s official version of the Italian war effort completely upside down, thereby anticipating Lussu’s antifascist novel. But cutting through myth and misinformation to reach the “real war” is a Sisyphean task (as military historians and students of war memoirs know), and Hemingway’s status as a truth teller on the subject of war is problematic at best. During much of his lifetime, Hemingway put himself forward as an authority on how to compose—and how to detect—a true war story. His editorship of Men at War (1942) secured his reputation in this regard. However, his personal testimony of war experience was notoriously fraudulent—except when distilled into the higher truth of art—and in his less-than-disciplined work as a war correspondent, he seemed at times more interested in self-aggrandizement (at the head of his notorious Irregulars, for example) than dispassionate reporting. In short, while
Hemingway had much to say about the issues of reliability and authenticity in war writing, his claims about his own service—and his behavior while supposedly capturing the “real war” as a journalist—complicate and even undercut his various pronouncements.

The two essays that comprise part 5 of this collection plunge us into the rich topic of Hemingway and truth telling in war literature, and they come from two uniquely qualified scholars—Daniel Clayton and Thomas G. Bowie Jr. Each semester, Clayton and Bowie team-teach an honors seminar at Regis University titled Stories from Wartime. They invite local veterans of World War II, the Korean War, or the Vietnam War to tell their stories to the class, and they introduce their students to the holdings of the Regis University Center for the Study of War Experience, an oral history archive founded and directed by Clayton. This pedagogical activity provides the perfect context for a discussion of Hemingway’s own war stories, as well as his judgments of those offered by other writers. In “Getting to the Truth: Hemingway, Cather, and the Testimony of Two World Wars,” Clayton introduces us to Stories from Wartime and then explores the Hemingway creed, outlined in the introduction to Men at War, that true war stories can only come from writers who possess “the authority of direct experience.” Clayton uses Hemingway’s famous dismissal of Willa Cather’s One of Ours (1922) to problematize this maxim. How was Cather’s vision of war, informed by interviews with returning soldiers and even praised in fan mail from veterans, any less authentic than Hemingway’s account of the Caporetto retreat, an event that he did not witness personally? Ultimately, Clayton offers two conclusions: first, that direct experience is a questionable basis for truth (he notes how the eyewitnesses interviewed in Stories from Wartime often unknowingly align their personal memories with cultural myths or even images from Hollywood); and, second, that war is too multifaceted of a human activity to be accurately captured by any single ideological perspective. Thus, One of Ours and A Farewell to Arms both tell true war stories, but neither tells the truth about war.

Bowie’s essay, “The Need for Narrative in Our Time: Hemingway’s ‘Tragic Adventure’ and Regis University’s Stories from Wartime,” offers a complementary discussion of Hemingway’s 1925 short story collection. Bowie rejects formalist readings of In Our Time, which seek to tie its notoriously disparate vignettes and stories into a unified whole, and instead he interprets the text as a messy, intentionally unresolved articulation of
“the same fears and uncertainties that veterans of conflict share” each semester in the Stories from Wartime seminar. In these, former servicemen and women struggle to understand what war has done to them and why. Bowie identifies a powerful “need for narrative,” and he persuasively contends that *In Our Time* expresses that same need without answers or closure when confronting an unthinkable world war.

Focused on longer trajectories, part 6 of *War + Ink* considers the impact of Hemingway’s early experiences on his later career. Although Hemingway’s brush with death in 1918—the first of several close calls during his lifetime—actually benefited the teenager by bolstering his image as a man of action and an authority on war, the event also left him shaken. Years later, he would describe the instant of his wounding as a frightening, quasi out-of-body experience. In “That Supreme Moment of Complete Knowledge: Hemingway’s Theory of the Vision of the Dying,” Mark Cirino asserts that Hemingway’s fascination with death, a fascination perhaps born on July 8, 1918, led him to write, again and again, about a specific metaphysical experience—namely, the instantaneous “life review” that the dying supposedly undergo as they pass out of existence. As Cirino demonstrates, life “flashes before the eyes” of numerous Hemingway characters at the point of their demise, including Robert Jordan at the end of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and the writer Harry in “Snows of Kilimanjaro.” Interestingly, such moments, speculative and invoking the fantastic, represent a striking departure from Hemingway’s usual focus on observable phenomena, and they align him with fellow modernists such as Joseph Conrad, who in *Heart of Darkness* describes the instant of death as “that supreme moment of complete knowledge.” Cirino’s compelling analysis will send readers back to some of the most famous death scenes in American fiction equipped with a new set of questions about the representational claims of Hemingway’s art.

With Lawrence Broer’s “Dangerous Families: A Midwestern Exorcism,” we move from death to parents, another dark territory for Hemingway. Through a masterful overview of the Nick Adams stories, which he reads as creative responses to trauma, Broer contends that Hemingway’s childhood, even more than his experience of war, left him with psychic wounds that took decades to heal. Other scholars have made similar arguments, but what sets Broer’s analysis apart is his persuasive assertion that Hemingway’s inability to see his father’s abundant failings (or his mother’s many virtues) forms a consistent and painful subtext within his work. Only in
*The Garden of Eden* does Hemingway allow an autobiographical character to express a truth long evaded by the author—“that he betrayed his art by denying or lying to himself about his father’s transgressions.”

Following logically upon Broer’s incisive treatment of the young Hemingway’s intimate (and deeply wounding) exposure to a household battle between the sexes, Kim Moreland’s contribution considers the writer’s resistance to new models of gender in wartime. Titled “Hemingway and Women at the Front: Blowing Bridges in *A Farewell to Arms, The Fifth Column,* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls,*” this essay sets Hemingway’s works of the 1920s and ‘30s (as well as his turbulent love life) against the backdrop of twentieth-century total warfare—warfare that demanded the mobilization of entire populations and, in the process, scrambled longstanding constructions of gendered space. Hemingway, Moreland persuasively asserts, never adjusted to these new realities. Indeed, the presence of female war correspondents amid the male arena of combat ultimately proved intolerable to him, as seen in his failed marriage to Martha Gellhorn, who embraced the opportunity to experience and to write about war, and his fiction, which abounds in attempts to sabotage the cultural bridge that allowed women to cross into this most sacred of male territories.

*War + Ink* concludes, appropriately enough, with a return to the city where Hemingway received his initiation into journalism—and so much else. In “Across the Canal and into Kansas City: Hemingway’s Westward Composition of Absolution in *Across the River and into the Trees,*” Matthew Nickel reads Colonel Cantwell’s story as a “search for expiation” set against a richly layered “symbolic landscape.” Venice, the novel’s principal setting, dominates this landscape. However, Kansas City makes an evocative appearance as well—as a site of memory that also marks a way forward. When Cantwell imagines taking Renata, his young Venetian lover, on a road trip into the American West, he chooses Kansas City as their point of departure. It is there that in language redolent of spiritual journeying and absolution they will “cross the river and go west.” Through a close reading of this scene, Nickel demonstrates how in the midst of a novel dominated by Old World gloom and the disenchantment of middle age, Kansas City, the breakout city of Hemingway’s youth, comes to signify the start of Cantwell’s “renewal and resurrection.”

The following eighteen essays offer the “true dope”—or as near as they can come to it—on the war-torn (and disease-ridden) world in which
Hemingway came of age; on the meaning of his early writings, ranging from *In Our Time* to *A Farewell to Arms*; on his contributions to the ongoing debate over what constitutes a true war story; and on the haunting echoes of childhood and late-adolescent adventure that reverberated through his work to the very end of his career. Like Cantwell’s road trip, *War + Ink* begins in Kansas City—and then shows how far Hemingway traveled as an artist and as a man.

**Works Cited**