

BOOK REVIEWS

Edited by Walter Darrell Haden

Judy Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith, editors. *Dear Boys: World War II Letters from a Woman Back Home*. Jackson, Mississippi: The University Press of Mississippi, 1991.

In their general research Judy Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith have devoted major attention to American women and their letter writing during World War II. At one point they examined over twenty-five thousand letters to chronicle the home front activities of American females then. In *Dear Boys* they have focused on the war-time newspaper column of Mrs. Keith Frazier Somerville of Cleveland, Mississippi. She composed a weekly column in the *Bolivar Commercial* from January 1943 through August 1945. Somerville, a public school teacher prior to World War II, wrote about Bolivar County servicemen for humanitarian and social reasons. Her interest was especially heightened by her having taught many of those youths. Like other women throughout the nation, she supported the war effort in various ways. Her most lasting contribution resulted from the *Bolivar Commercial* editor's inviting her to use his newspaper to communicate with all countians on military duty.

In her column, "Dear Boys," Somerville touched on varied topics for the public. She covered recent marriages and the eventual arrival of babies to those couples. She marveled at the families with numerous relatives "across the water." Perhaps surprising to some readers, she gave notable attention to ethnic groups including Negroes, Italians, Jews, and Chinese. To her "all you boys are heroes." Consequently she anguished, "Purple hearts are getting too plentiful hereabouts." So emotionally involved were she and other countians that "we think of ourselves as soldiers on the home front." The war was so real that it had "come to all the Main Streets of Mississippi." She knew of local men who had come "in on a wing and a prayer" and thought of herself as a pencil-packing mama, not the "Pistol-packing Mama" in the popular song. She even exhorted service personnel to "just measure your delight in mail and gauge by it how much of a thrill we get out of hearing from you." She even rather accurately, albeit generally, described the Oak Ridge secret project and exulted in how well that secret had been kept. All along she longed for world peace and put great hope in the United Nations.

Editors Litoff and Smith furnished the reader with all sorts of useful information. Somerville said, "Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition," and the editors explained her allusions. She told us of Camp Campbell, which today is Ft. Campbell. As Somerville wrote about current events and then-special decorations, Litoff and Smith frequently clarify the allusions.

Mid-South readers should find this an interesting way of learning about World War II even without knowing the people mentioned in those newspaper columns of fifty years ago.

Marvin Downing

Michael J. Lyons. *World War II: A Short History*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1989, 1994.

Michael J. Lyons has updated his 1989 volume with a second edition. Accordingly, he has added a chapter on "Total War and the Home Fronts" to cover the domestic impacts of that war. The "Aftermath" chapter becomes current with continuing results of World War II as seen in the great changes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union since the late 1980s. He has developed a comprehensive table of contents which quickly tells the reader what to expect. His book is well organized and presented with a relatively straightforward literary style. A most definite strength of Lyons' approach is the integration of brief and pertinent biographical sketches as the main persons are mentioned in the text.

By his own admission, Lyons wanted "to satisfy the needs of the college student in the classroom as well as those of the general reader." He has done so by examining the profound impacts of World War I and the economic aspects of the 1920s and 1930s. Some readers may be tempted to skip Chapters One and Two, but these are vital to understanding political and economic feelings of pre-World War II Eastern and Western Europe. Individuals interested in just World War II find the military campaigns dealt with in chapters five through twenty-six.

Throughout the volume Lyons concerns himself with differences in historical interpretations of events, causes and results of the war. Some controversial issues considered are the background of and reasons for appeasement in the 1930s, the Jewish question, Pearl Harbor, the dropping of the atomic bombs, and results of late World War II Allied conferences. For instance, Lyons concludes that the Western Allies acted against the best interests of Eastern European countries but acquiesced in the accomplished fact of Soviet military position and strength there. Along the way Lyons keeps readers informed of the advantages and limitations of "Magic" and "Ultra," the code names for the intelligence gleaned from the supposedly secret German diplomatic and military transmissions.

Lyons ends his work by looking at the abrupt decline of the Soviet Union in the "Second Russian Revolution" of August, 1991. In reality, those changes marked "the last chapter of World War II" as seen especially in the decades of the Cold War. Lyons anticipates that economic and political instability will be persistent in the next few years in Eastern Europe and the old Soviet Union. Lest the United States be too smug, Lyons concludes his volume with the ominous insight that "If the United States does not put its house in order, it may find that there are different roads to economic ruin."

Although this short history encompasses only 335 pages, it will still take a while to finish because it is packed with quite readable information.

Marvin Downing

Richard Lidz. *MANY KINDS OF COURAGE: An Oral History of World War II*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1980.

From Kurt Lange's account of Adolf Hitler's rise to power in the 1930s to Miss Palchikoff's disturbing recollections of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, this book tells the story of World War II in the words of eighteen participants from as many different locales.

The author has provided good background and history where needed in each of the fifteen chapters, but the heart of this volume is in the personal narratives which have been tape-recorded by people who experienced the dangers and privations of the war. Here is Stefan Korbonski's account of the Polish Underground as they sabotaged the production of goods which were destined for the German cause and as they built and operated clandestine radio transmitters to contact the Allies.

Sergeant John Fowler recalled the heroic rescue and mass confusion of Dunkirk and his close brush with death. RAF Pilot Reggie Dexter, who was shot down over the English Channel, also narrowly escaped death in the water:

The water now seemed much colder. I looked down at my hands and seeing them made me realize that I'd gone blind. So I was going to die. It came to me like that—I'm going to die'—and oddly enough, I wasn't afraid.

The absolute horror of the Nazi concentration camps was recorded by survivors Claude Vaillant-Couturier, who was imprisoned because she would not co-operate with Petain's French Police, and Dr. Franz Blaha, who refused to do experimental operations on live prisoners at Dachau.

Japanese-Americans James Kazato and Roy Yano fared much better than most POWs but feel that they should not have been interned at all:

Even now years after the war is over we still have certain unsolved questions in our minds about the Constitution—how is it possible to have American citizens in concentration camps?

Roy Yano was released from the camp to serve in the OSS and later worked as translator and interpreter at Gen. MacArthur's Headquarters in Tokyo.

There are short but very dramatic accounts of the attack on Pearl Harbor and the fall of Corregidor, and a long one of the island-hopping campaigns to liberate the Pacific. Thirty years later, Former Marine Al Rittenburh describes the invasion of Iwo Jima as

the clearest single event in my life. I can't tell you why it remains so clear in my mind, more clear than things that happened to me a week ago. I think it was probably the sense of trauma.

Many Kinds of Courage is not an official history of great leaders and their grand strategies, but is rather the story of ordinary people caught up in war and of the human spirit under the most trying of circumstances. The nine-page, four hundred topic index helps to make this work a valuable reference on life and death during World War II.

Joe Bone