

*A Secret Burden: Memories of the Border War by South African soldiers who fought in it*  
edited by Karen Batley (Jonathan Ball) R130

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The Border War, like all wars since the Trojan, has produced its share of literature, the sometimes thinly fictionalised experiences of the men who fought there. Novels like Damon Galgut's *The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs* and Mark Behr's *The Smell of Apples* used the War as a backdrop to the moral and emotional development of their protagonists: these were fully developed fictions, in which the raw experience was processed into the material of art..

*A Secret Burden*, by contrast, gives us the raw material – or as raw as material can be that has been subjected to the primary processing of being written down and subsequently edited. In concept, then, it's not very different from Jacqui Thompson's recent *An Unpopular War*, but whereas that was a collection of interviews with soldiers, the body of Batley's book consists of :writings she received in response to an appeal for soldiers' recollections. Interestingly she tells us that her first appeals, through the print media, met with almost no response: it was only after she had appeared on a television talk show that she was inundated with contributions and, in many cases, requests from young men to talk to her.

It would seem, then, that the contributors were by and large not readers; that is, that their writings collected here were not in intention "literary". As Batley says, "Many soldiers who might, under ordinary circumstances, never have attempted a poem feel bound to record their life-death trial in poetic or diary form." It would thus be futile to look here for a Wilfred Owen or an Isaac Rosenberg: these writings are notable for their immediacy and involvement with their surroundings rather than for poetic inventiveness or sophistication.

In a thoughtful introductory essay, Batley invokes Robert Jay Lifton's concept, derived from the Vietnam War, of the "socialised warrior" who "lends himself to the corruption of patriotic chauvinism" – who, in short, has been brainwashed into believing that he's fighting for a just cause.

Perhaps not surprisingly, few of the soldiers here represented seem socialised in that sense: one would not expect the fully socialised warrior to write introspective poems about his experience. These soldiers may not often overtly question the ideology by whose questionable grace they find themselves on the Border or in Angola, but in almost every contribution there is at least an implicit doubt about the meaning of it all. At times, as in the last stanza of a poem called "Doubts", the uncertainty is quite explicit: "I sit here with my doubts,/ a mental pain that makes me shout:/ How long can the war go on/ before the Creator loads his gun?"

Not all writers evince such faith in the Creator's omnipotence; another poem, "Sentry" imagines God as embroiled in combat with Satan, at the expense of mere humans: "Endless vigil/lone sentry/staring/without purpose --/ when Satan and God/ clashed/ in a duel/ of death --/ and you went home/in/ a jiffy bag."

In spite of such occasional cynicisms, the general tendency amongst these young men is to cling on to the security of religion. This may be a vindication of the old adage that there are no atheists in a foxhole, but one senses here something more desperate, a panic

in the face of ultimate meaninglessness. As one diarist writes: “You know, your religion often becomes very strong on the Border, and you really started believing in God. There must be someone protecting you and he has certain ways of doing things, allowing certain people to survive and others to die.”

No matter that so much of the rest of this collection offers a sardonic comment on such faith in God’s selective mercy; one would not want to deprive a soldier in battle of the illusion that “there must be someone protecting you”. There is something very moving about the account, in a long extract called “Casevac”, of the soldiers who were sent to the sick bay to “recover” from the trauma of having killed a friend by accident: “They just slept and cried and read their Bibles. The dominee used to spend a lot of time with them and then they got sent back to their bases.”

What matters here, as everywhere in this collection, is not the rationality or otherwise of the response, but its vivid immediacy, all the stronger for being so prosaic: “They just slept and cried and read their Bibles”: flat as it is, it ranks, as a description of emotional devastation, with Wilfred Owen’s line in “Mental Cases”: “These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished.”

Possibly related to the reluctance to surrender a faith in ultimate meaning is the relative absence of any questioning of the political justification of their presence on the Border. Thus the writer of “Maybe” articulates a common bewilderment in the face of contradictions he dare not explore too far: “I don’t blame the SADF,” he says. “I believe in my country, its flag and our uniform.” But he carries on: “On the other hand I have realised that war and death are disgusting.” He concludes: “I’m obviously very confused.”

It is in their confusion, so much more humane than the certainties that conscripted them, that these documents are moving: records of unsocialised human vulnerability and fellow-feeling rather than of heroism.