

*The King's Shilling* by Hamilton Wendes (Jacana)

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War novels have the disadvantage of having a ready-made plot-line, usually familiar to their readers: there is never really any doubting the outcome. But of course, though we know England will win the Boer War, the two World Wars, and even the Falklands War, we can never be sure that any individual character will survive; and it is at this level that war novels must engage the readers: not the larger combat between nations, but the personal conflict of individuals. And simple tales of bravery, of triumphing over the odds, of unselfish sacrifice of one's life for one's country or one's buddy – these are no longer in fashion. It has been a long time since we had a war novel that did not fundamentally question war.

*The King's Shilling* is no exception to this trend. Though thoroughly immersed in the blood and guts of war, it has little time for glory. Set in East Africa during the First World War, featuring a South African regiment confronting a regiment of 'German' askaris, there is little pretence that anybody here is fighting for his country.

The East African theatre is a little-known facet of the Great War, and indeed, by comparison with the millions of men killed on the Western Front, battles like that at Salaita Hill, where 133 South Africans were killed, seem negligible. But to 133 men Salaita Hill was the end of the world, and even to the survivors the battle was traumatic, for many of them their first experience of active combat.

It is this last fact – the relative inexperience of the soldiers – that Wende exploits in his novel. His central character and narrator is Lieutenant Michael Fuller, an ordinary young South African who enlists for no particular reason other than that in the circles he moves in (English-speaking Johannesburg) it seems to be expected of one to do so.

His decision to go is complicated by the fact that he has recently met and fallen in love with Helen, a woman married to a soldier fighting on the Western Front. He has little idea of what to expect in battle and, crucially, even less of an idea of how he will react to what he finds.

Wende constructs his tale around this idea of the unpredictability of responses under pressure. Central to this theme is Fuller's superior, Captain Carter, an experienced soldier who disgraced himself in India and is now determined to redeem himself in his own eyes and those of others.

Wende reconstructs the preliminaries, the battle itself and the aftermath with great skill and verve; he has clearly done his research, but he has done more: he has imagined what it is like to be in battle, what sounds one will hear, what smells one will smell, above all, what emotions one will feel.

In this instance, the generals who 'plan' the attack are bunglers and fools, and the men have knowingly to charge a heavily fortified position with very little hope of taking it. The officers like Fuller have the task of leading their men to a futile death.

Wende adds to this possibly over-familiar World War One scenario by bringing into play the ethnic complications of Empire: in the regiment are British officers who fought against the Boers; but there are also Boers who fought against the English. Backing up the South African regiment is a Baluchi regiment; fighting on the German side are the

African askaris. Many of the white South African soldiers are contemptuous of the black enemy and of the Indian allies alike.

In the event, by an uncomfortable irony of Empire, the South Africans are routed by the askaris and rescued by the Baluchis. The battle itself is recreated in vivid and often painful detail: in particular, Wende brings home to us the moral limbo of close combat, in which self-preservation takes over from almost every other instinct. Under such conditions bravery under fire is a kind of fluke, and cowardice a natural reaction.

This situation forms the backdrop to the main action of the second part of the novel: three young South Africans, terrified and bewildered, desert in the face of the enemy and attempt to make their way to the coast to escape the war. Major Reading, the commanding officer, orders Captain Carter and Fuller to find the men, lest they be found by another regiment and shot as deserters, or captured by the Germans and used for propaganda purposes. With them Carter and Fuller take two crack Baluchi soldiers and a corporal from the King's African Rifles.

The racial composition of the little expedition makes a nice point, but it takes a certain suspension of disbelief to swallow this aspect of the plot: would a senior officer on the eve of a crucial battle send off five competent soldiers to save the lives of three deserters, and land himself with the problem of what to do with them once they have been found?

No matter: this part of the book forms a satisfying quest narrative, the missing men becoming less important in themselves than for what they represent to Fuller: a rejection of a futile war, the validity of fear in the face of hopeless odds, the right of individual choice in the face of discipline. When they do find the deserters ... well, it would spoil the tale to reveal the novel's ingenious denouement, but suffice it to say that it ties things up very neatly.

*The King's Shilling* is a fascinating recreation of a little-known incident of the Great War, an engrossing exploration of the ethics of war, and a meticulous evocation of the African landscape. It is also a lively tale very well told. If the love interest at times seems rather extraneous to the plot, that, too, is defensible as representing the forlorn desire to make love, not war.