

# ON WAR BOOKS

BY G. K. CHESTERTON

I FEAR that the poet Campbell is largely forgotten, though many things about him may be and should be remembered. He wrote "Hohenlinden," a rattling good battle lyric, with a rhythm really like the rushing of horses. He testified to a better age of English liberal opinion, by writing the hackneyed lines about the destruction of Poland, and how freedom shrieked when Kosciusko fell. I do not know whether anyone remembered it when the nation regained its rights; there was certainly no doubt that pedantry and hypocrisy shrieked when Kosciusko rose from the dead. I need not make a further parade of the very few facts I know about Campbell. He used to wake people up in the middle of the night with an idea for a poem, and demand tea; a questionable habit. But there is a story told about him which is now something of a parable. In other respects, I imagine he had the normal notions of his time and country, and was not insincere in his patriotic poems. It was therefore the more surprising to the company, when he rose to his feet at a dinner of English literary men, in the middle of the great war which included Hohenlinden and The Battle of the Baltic; and proposed the health of Napoleon Bonaparte. A storm of protests broke; but Campbell calmly waved them away. "I will admit," he said, "that the Emperor is a usurper; that he is the enemy of our country, and if you will of the whole human race. But, gentlemen, let us be just to our great enemy. Let us not forget that he shot a bookseller." Here again, of course, he spoke under the conventions of his time. Nowadays, meaning the same thing, he would have said a publisher.

Animated by the same principles, I solemnly lift my hand and say in tones of moving sincerity and emotion, "Heil Hitler!" Hastily clothing myself in a field-grey uniform, a brown shirt, a steel helmet, and a ritual vestment covered with a pattern of swastikas, I proclaim deepest heart's devotion to the Leader. And, in case this causes any such momentary surprise as was stirred by the toast of Mr. Campbell, I hasten to explain the special cause of my feelings. Herr Hitler and his group have done many things of which I cannot approve. They murdered a number of people without trial during a sort of week-end trip. They murdered a man merely for being an influential Catholic; and, what is even worse, explained that they had murdered him by mistake. They beat and bully poor Jews in concentration camps; and, what is even worse, they do not beat or bully rich Jews who are at the head of big banking houses. They talk about preserving the purity of their blood. They commit every crime. But let us be just to our great enemy; or to all our enemies, great or small. Let us not forget that they did destroy, not a mere bookseller, but a book. Let us not forget, in fairness to them, that they did make a bonfire which burned to ashes a very much boomed book called, "All Quiet On The Western Front."

This service to literature was the nearest that Germany will ever come to atoning for setting fire to the library of Louvain. For the booming of books of this sort, noisily and needlessly, is quite as much a mark of our time as the making of better books, decently and modestly, was of the times to which the library of Louvain looked back. We all know the marks, I might say the trademarks, of this type of modern production. First of all, it is always in the manner of mass production. It is generally a big book, demanding big publicity, big circulation, big choruses of reviewers; in short, it is the sort of great literature that is best managed by big business. I remember many such books that were merely booms. Lombroso's brutal rubbish about criminals was one of them; another was his equally hebraic relative's rubbish about Degenerates. I am happy to say that I cannot even recall his relative's name; but for months he bestrode Europe like a giant. As we are familiar with the material, so we are with the moral quality. For these books are very moral. They take no notice of nonsense like art for art's sake; indeed they take no notice of art at all. They have entirely reversed the narrow prejudice of the 'nineties against "a novel with a purpose." This sort of creation never comes by accident; the crime was done on purpose. And its principle is that men must have a story with a moral; so long as it is not a moral moral. We all know the fictions in which people are allowed without limit to moralise against morality; against marriage or chivalry or personal honour. In these special cases the point was to moralise against national honour. These books burst upon the world originally, to point out the little-known fact that peril is perilous and pain is painful. But the thesis thrust upon us was not really the obvious thesis that war is heart-rending and horrible; it was the thesis that there is nothing noble about defying horror or enduring the rending of the heart. A justly popular English writer has been so much seized with this fanaticism, of denying any military virtues even as the accidents of military conditions, that he actually argued that most soldiers are safe to the point of monotony, and there is no risk to be represented as romance. To such a mental state does monomania reduce even lively minds. It did not seem to occur to him that he was abandoning the whole case against war, in order to make a case against warriors. If soldiers do not suffer, there is an end of all the huge humanitarian movement against soldiering. And if soldiers do suffer, it seems rather mean to deny them even the credit of suffering. Logic of this type debilitates most minds of this school. I remember a critic who justified certain gross details in "All Quiet On The Western Front," on the ground that the world ought to know the coarse conditions under which soldiers had to live. Because unpleasant things ought not to be public even in a camp, therefore they ought to be published to the public. Because it is infamous that they have no privacy on the battle-



field, it is admirable that they should have nothing but publicity on the book-stall.

It is in a very different sense that a saner generation will cover up such things in shame. It will recognise all the horror involved in any case; but it will perhaps consider this sort of publicity the most horrible thing. The time will most certainly come when we shall be much more ashamed of the war-books than of the war. Never before has such a laborious effort been made to discredit even the desperate virtues, with which man can confront the tragic accidents of his history. Another war-book, of this pessimistic and paralysing intention, has been lately boomed, though with very much less success; and I do not propose to advertise it here. It is enough to say that it was taken up and advertised by one of the big capitalist newspapers; because the horrors it described were carefully confined to the French army. It thus became useful to that great propaganda in our press, which is dedicated to the dignified and enlightened end of abusing all foreigners. Foreign armies have mutineers; foreign armies contain cowards; foreign armies have panics or false accusations of panic; foreign armies have court-martials; and, being foreign court-martials, they are frightfully unjust. This is that carefully selected and exquisitely balanced combination of pacifism and patriotism, which now blooms in our press, and which by either name would smell as sweet. For my part I vastly prefer either howling jingoism or wild fanatical peace-at-any-price. The merit, and even the original sincerity, of books of this sort may vary a great deal; but neither could have given them the sort of practical importance that they have had. In a great many cases, the work partakes of the character of hack-work. It exhibits the commonplace tragedy of all mass production; in its disproportion of responsibility. The important person in such a story is not the author but the publisher or the publicity man or the very uncritical critic. The only intellectual interest is in a new and abnormal motive; which is not so much a sense of tragedy, as a hatred of anybody being made the hero of a tragedy. Hagiographers might over-rate the torments of martyrdom; but nobody before ever wanted to under-rate the martyrs . . . This is a literary number; and I had meant to talk about the literary quality of such works; but I find there is not enough of it to talk about.

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## **Book Production and Typography** *By Eric Gill*

WE may assume that the business of book production derives from the fact that somebody had something to say which the scribe was persuaded to write out on the understanding that he would 'get his money back' from the author or from buyers of books. There are still many people with something to say, but the business of book production has long since ceased to be so simple. The tables have been reversed; instead of the author employing the printer, it is the printer who employs the author. By printer, in this connection, I mean of course the publisher, newspaper owner, advertising agent, etc. In fact, book production does not now exist because people have things to say, but because book producers have machinery which must be fed. Other things come into it. For instance, the reading public before the time of compulsory education was very much smaller; to-day everybody reads books, everybody has the habit of reading, everybody must be supplied with something readable. People go to a Boots library and say to the Assistant: give me something to read; people get into the train in the morning saying to themselves: I must buy a paper. Reading is like smoking, a habit and a dope, and this habit is the main-stay of the man with the machines.

But all this business of reading comes down to us from pre-industrial and pre-compulsory education times and we are still dogged by typographic traditions belonging to the past. There is the same difficulty in all the different arts, in architecture, in clothes, even in amusements. And the difficulty of dealing with it is made greater by the fact that it is not clear to us whether we should attempt to perfect our industrial world on its own lines, or to destroy it and go on to a better way of living, or whether we should continue the 19th century practice of attempting to make machine-made things look like hand-made. Adherents of the different ways of thinking are all carrying on together. I myself, if I may say so, belong to two camps at once. I say that the present kind of world is a bad kind for human beings, but that if, for reasons outside my control, "machinery has come to stay" and all that, the sensible thing to do is to abandon the pre-industrial styles and develop the perfect machine-made thing. I say I am in two camps, because while advocating the perfecting of industrialism and even designing printing types and other things suitable for machine production, I elect to live in a manner outside industrialism and to produce tombstones and sculptures of an almost Anglo-Saxon primitivity. Thus I get the best of both worlds, or rather, the second best, for while I can beat the industrial designer at his own game, I do not really like his world, and though I work in my primitive Anglo-Saxon manner I cannot produce any sculptures as good as those of the time of King Alfred.