IMAGINING THE GREAT WAR, A CENTURY LATER

GUEST COLUMN
JIM VAN NOSTRAND

There are competing schools of thought as to the inspiration for J.R.R. Tolkien's visions of Mordor in his epic fantasy trilogy, The Lord of the Rings.

Some say it was the steelworks and blast furnaces of the industrialized West Midlands northwest of Birmingham, England. But many others — including myself — believe Tolkien's memories of his British Army service in the horrific World War I battle of the Somme were the real catalyst. The British suffered 57,000 casualties on the first day of the battle alone. The campaign would claim almost 1.5 million Allied soldiers, including the lives of two of his closest friends and another shortly afterward.

Several passages in the novels evoke echoes of the blasted moonscapes of northern France — the muddy trenches, the widespread pestilence, the barbed wire, the deadly clouds of poisonous gas, the enemy siege works, and death and destruction on an unimaginable scale.

For example, as Frodo and Sam cross the Dead Marshes in The Two Towers, they see the faces of the dead below the water. "Grim faces and evil, and noble faces and sad. Many faces proud and fair, and weeds in their silver hair. But all foul, all rotting, all dead."

Sunday marks the 100th anniversary of the Armistice ending the war. Memories of one of the most cataclysmic events in world history have mostly faded from the public consciousness, as the generation who fought in it has passed. It is left to their children and grandchildren to preserve the accounts of their sacrifices.

As recounted by reporter Edward Stratton in today's newspaper, Clatsop County residents served the war effort both overseas and at home. The Doughboy Monument in Astoria is the most visible tribute to their contributions.

Fittingly, a memorial service is planned for 11 a.m. Sunday at the monument, marking the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month. Bells will ring around the city. A 1 p.m. event in the Astoria Library's Flag Room will include the reading of the names of 34 county residents who died in the war.

Before Nov. 11, the war had killed 14 million people over four years, including 9 million soldiers, sailors and airmen from 28 countries, according to the Associated Press. Almost 11,000 died on the final morning, many in the final minutes.

"Hurrah!! Hurrah!!," local Army veteran William Carl Urell's diary from Nov. 11, 1918, reads. "The war is over at last. Hurrah!!!!!

ASSOCIATED PRESS

American troops carrying rifles with fixed bayonets climb over a sandbag revetment in France in 1918.

Walking on hallowed ground

As a young lieutenant serving in the Army's 1st Infantry Division, I had the opportunity in the 1980s to tour several of the battlefields in France on which American soldiers fought — Cantigny, Soissons, St. Mihiel and the Meuse-Argonne.

At first, it's hard to imagine the scenes recounted in diaries and official unit histories, and depicted in grainy black-and-white photos from that era. The Argonne countryside is a verdant and idyllic place today, full of lush farms, lakes, thick forests and picturesque villages.

Then, driving through the region, the reminders appear. The vast cemeteries full of crosses. The mass graves marked by towering monuments. The overgrown outlines of vast trenchworks and machine-gun emplacements.

The 1918 Meuse-Argonne offensive, which ended the war, involved 1.2 million American troops and was a particularly brutal affair, even by the standards of the day. Fresh, inexperienced, eager soldiers were thrown headlong into frontal assaults against machine guns manned by seasoned German troops in densely wooded terrain. Much of the combat devolved into close-range fighting with pistols, bayonets and knives.

I thought to myself at the time how fortunate my grandfather was to have served on a Navy ship during the war, not on the front lines in that hellish fray.

The most haunting memory of the trip is of the "Trench of the Bayonets" near Verdun. In 1916, a company of the French 137th Regiment defending Fort Douaumont was annihilated almost to the last man when a German artillery barrage collapsed the walls of their earthworks.

They were found with a neat line of bayonets sticking out of the ground, still attached to their rifles, a body buried next to each one. The site has been preserved nearly intact.

War story wrapped in fantasy

Tolkien, a young Oxford academic, was 24 when he arrived at the Somme that same year. He began writing the first drafts of his mythology about Middle-earth, as he recalled, "by candle light in bell-tents, even some down in dugouts under shell fire," according to Joseph Loconte, an associate professor of history at the King's College in New York.

"When Frodo returns to the Shire, his quest at an end, he resembles not so much the conquering hero as a shellshocked veteran," Loconte wrote in the New York Times in 2016. "Here is a war story, wrapped in fantasy, that delivers painful truths about the human predicament.

"Tolkien used the language of myth not to escape the world, but to reveal a mythic and heroic quality in the world as we find it," he added. "Perhaps this was the greatest tribute he could pay to the fallen of the Somme."

Jim Van Nostrand is editor of The Daily Astorian.

A timely classic under discussion at the Cannon Beach Library

AT THE LIBRARY
JOSEPH BERNT

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times for participants in Cannon Beach Reads this past month.

For lack of space, the comments justifying use of this famous opening to Charles Dickens' "A Tale of Two Cities" were cut from last month's column. So, let's return to why the Cannon Beach Reads group, led by discussant Wanda Meyer-Price, found reading and discussing "The Handmaid's Tale," Margaret Atwood's popular dystopian novel, difficult in the wake of the Brett Kavanaugh hearings. Some American history helps here.

In 1878, Senator Arlan Sargent first introduced and the U.S. Senate first rejected words that would be ratified 42 years later as the 19th Amendment in 1920, with razor-thin support from Tennessee's House of Representatives: "The right of citizens to vote shall not be abridged by the United States or any State on account of sex."

In 1963, 43 years after women's suffrage became the law of the land, Betty Friedan addressed "the problem that has no name" or why life as a housewife with children in the suburbs left many women dissatisfied. Friedan's "The Feminine Mystique" initiated second-wave feminism.

In 1972, Congress passed the Equal Rights Amendment ("Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex."). Suffragist Alice Paul and others had lobbied unsuccessfully for this amendment since 1921. In 1972, 22 states ratified the ERA, but ratification ended in 1977 with only 35 states approving, three states short of passage.

Ratification remained at 35 states for another 40 years until Nevada in 2017 and Illinois in 2018 ratified the ERA. So, 98 years after ratification of the 19th Amendment, ERA passage still awaits approval by another state. Treating citizens equally takes time.

That so few states ratified the ERA after 1972, may have influenced Atwood to write "The Handmaid's Tale" when she did, but she also wrote during a year that George Orwell's "1984" made significant. Moreover, 1984 brought another reminder of how long some states would take to even accept women's suffrage.

Mississippi, the last state to ratify the 19th Amendment, did so in 1984, the year Atwood began writing her dystopian novel that—taking a feminist standpoint — echoes themes found in George Orwell's "1984": depersonalization, repression, surveillance, inequality and continuous war.

Atwood's novel focuses on abuse of women as breeders in a polluted and increasingly infertile world. Only the "commanders" have an opportunity to foster children by either fortunate fertile wives or surrogate "handmaids," who copulate monthly in a perverse ritual.

Always monitored by "aunts" and "guardians," handmaids in Gilead (the United States of the future) — while considered privileged and protected as essential to Gilead's continued existence — may not have careers, read, receive professional education, communicate with others or leave commanders' homes except to shop for groceries and other domestic products. Their every action literally risks a death sentence.

It was the best of times and the worst of times to read "The Handmaid's Tale" as the nation focused on male senators ignoring and refusing to investigate accusations from women, testimony that a privileged supreme court nominee with a reputation for heavy drinking and aggressive behavior had sexually abused them. What better time to read a dystopian novel centered on systemic, legal sexual abuse and the silencing of women?

But it was the worst of times, as well, to read what initially seems an unrealistic critique of women's treatment and status. Had Atwood overreacted? Remember, a major concern about the Kavanaugh nomination was belief that he would undo Roe v. Wade, a 1973 decision reached during the rise of second-wave feminism.

Remember that Atwood predicts legal suppression of the rights of women to own property, work, hold assets or control what happens to their own bodies. Remember how many state legislatures have passed laws restricting women's access to abortion, birth control, clinics and family planning — to limit or repeal Roe v. Wade. Remember how long women have sought equal rights with men, not to mention having their accusations believed or seriously investigated by aging men controlling a Senate hearing room in 2018.

Yes, it is the best of times and worst of times to read and discuss "The Handmaid's Tale," now available at the Cannon Beach Library.

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