

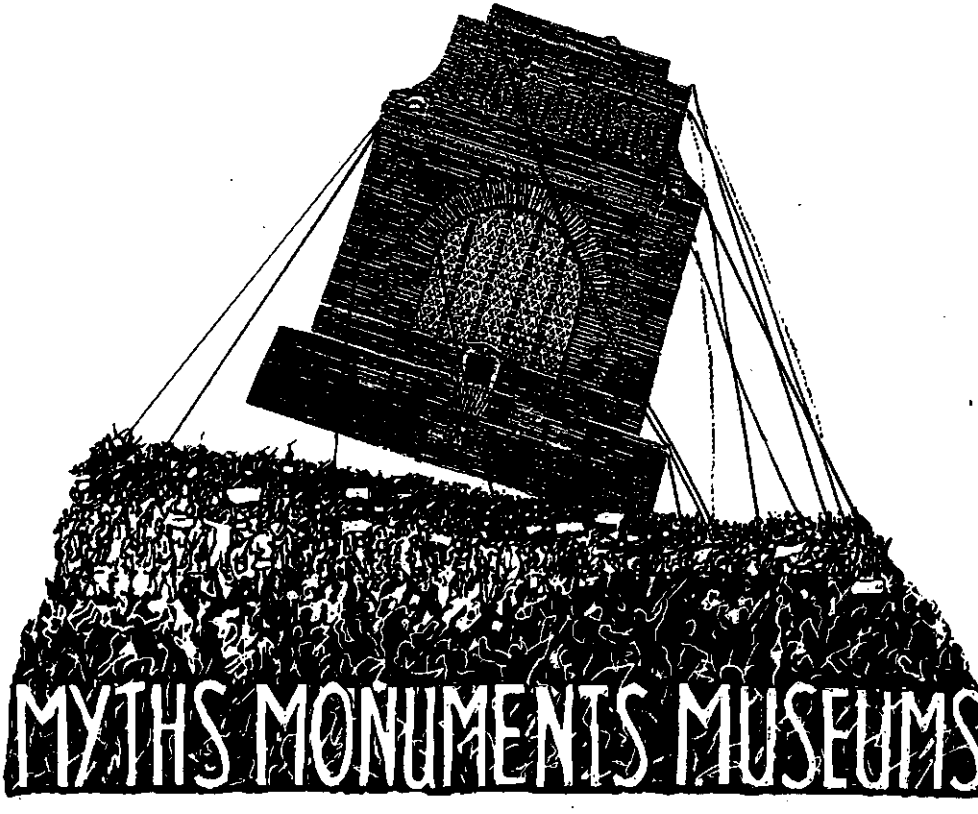
https://dspace.org/

Into Bluebeard's chamber: the problems of presenting military history

Patterson, H.

1992-07-16T06:55:33Z
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/8028

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/



NEW PREMISES?

16 - 18 JULY 1992

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND
HISTORY WORKSHOP

INTO BLUEBEARD'S CHAMBER:THE PROBLEMS OF PRESENTING MILITARY HISTORY

H. Patterson

S.A National Museum of Military History, Johannesburg.



AFRICANA

Emotions are the major obstacle in the presentation of military history and the study of conflict. Because 'War is Hell' (W T Sherman), many have believed that if we ignore it will go away. Unfortunately of all recorded history only about 250 years of peace have been noted and this excludes informal war such as banditry and piracy[1]. The belief, that ignoring something will make it go away, has a strange impact on the critical faculties. Those who in their own fields will critically weigh the evidence and come to sound conclusions can or will not do so when it comes to violence in any of its forms. This is especially the case when it comes to the history of early man. The evidence, concerning early man and violence, is, at this stage, insufficient to come to a conclusion as to peaceful or violent nature of humankind[2]. Unfortunately it is possible that significant evidence will be ignored because it conflicts with the beliefs or world view of the interpreter of the evidence. Given the existence of the knowledge of how to build weapons which can destroy our biosphere, this evasion of the existence of violence and by extension large scale violence or conflict in the form of war holds serious problems for the survival of humanity as whole. Indeed our inability to cope effectively with aggression in whatever form severely compromises our ability to achieve the peaceful and just society which most proclaim to be their goal. Much of the so-called attempts to 'cope' with aggression constitute an encouragement of aggression.

This inability to cope with existence of violence leads to the second main emotional response to violence. Both responses are linked. However because war is bad, when a group uses violence to achieve its ends, both the group and its constituent individuals seek refuge in hypocrisy. War is what others (the out group) do. We (the in group) engage in; crusades, holy war, *jihads*, prosecute our just struggle and so forth. The situation is aggravated by a failure, largely caused by the ignoring of the existence of conflict or denying that it is practised by the in group, to reach a consensus on what exactly is a war. To the survivor, there is little difference between a brawl and a battle. To put it more brutally you are just as dead if you are killed by a mugger in a back alley as if you are vaporized by a nuclear weapon. We, rightly, fear nuclear weapons but this should not blind us to the fact that more people have been killed by knives and clubs than by nuclear weapons[3]. Modern weapons have killed thousands but the more primitive and improvised weapons still claim their toll. The truth is startling. As weapons have become more powerful casualty rates have declined[4]. Yet a weapon without an operator is no more deadly than a pile of sand and you can be killed by a pile of sand. The wielder is the danger, the weapon only makes him more dangerous.

The essence of the problem is not weapons which are merely purpose built tools but with the minds which constructed them. *Homo sapiens* is a prerequisite for *Homo interfector* (man the killer)[5]. When we talk about war, we are talking about killing. There always has been a considerable degree of ambiguity about attitudes towards killing. A symptom of this ambiguity has been briefly touched on above in the terminology used to

describe large scale conflict. War is the pejorative term, while the rest are the euphemisms used to justify the use of physical force against another group. The basis of this ambiguity is that the violence within a group is unacceptable. The cohesion of the group is threatened if violence is allowed to rage unchecked. If the cohesion of the group is disrupted then its ability to deal with external threats is destroyed and the survival of the individuals who make up the group is in doubt. This threat to survival, which is to a large extent is due to successful co-operation between members of a group, is the motivation for taboos and laws against actions which could destroy that co-operation.

Conversely the taboos against killing outsiders whether animal or human are less strong and in some cases non-existent. Indeed this situation has been prevalent for much of recorded history[4]. It is a delusion that our times are more stressful than in the past. To those who have to live through them most periods of history lack stability and permanence. It is an aspect of our self-centredness that we imagine that our times and problems are unique[5].

For us, as we are experiencing them, they assume an uniqueness because we are directly involved. This obsession with ourselves which allows us to think that our problems are unique also allows many to kill strangers or outsiders with little or no qualms. Indeed, if this killing is criticized, the critic is liable to be reviled. Furthermore such killings usually acquire a certain amount of self-justifying myth as well as a tendency to encourage the use of language which obscures the act. In more extreme instances the actions may be highly praised in language which denotes approval and encourages emulation. The opposite attitude is shown when the in group loses members to outsiders or strangers. Then the killings become the most heinous of crimes and the killers, if not designated in stronger terms, become criminals or animals who must be terminated with extreme prejudice. The use of the phase to terminate with extreme prejudice is, of course, an euphemism for killing in the most brutal manner possible.

So certain people are allowed to kill and by extension are allowed to use violence on others. If we go further only certain groups are allowed to wage war. I beg your pardon, I mean prosecute your crusade, jihad, war of national liberation, revolution, etc. One need just fill in the term that makes you happy and stills your conscience in the blank space.

While you are making up your minds about a conscience soothing term for war, I will shock you. War is what we all engage in or have considered prosecuting. The only exception, in this case, are those who do not condone violence no matter who perpetrates it. The preceding discussion was just to cover the opening of the door into the forbidden chamber. We are now face to face with the corpses of our predecessors because are we looking at the bodies of previous wives or husbands and at those who killed them. I used the term predecessors but who has entered the forbidden chamber? Is it the unlucky spouse or is it the killer who has come to prepare the chamber for the next victim.

Your reaction to a display which recreates the chamber, shows some of the garments, or the hideous artifacts associated with the corpses will depend on who you are, not what you conceive yourself to be. Likewise if you are the curator arranging the display you are faced with a major problem. It is unlikely that you will avoid giving offence to someone. A neutral description is certain to offend those who hold extreme views. The killer, who feels that the slayings were perfectly justified, will certainly resent any suggestion that they were not. The victims, if they could view the display, would haunt anyone who dared suggest that there might have been any grounds for their being killed. Other parties may believe that the poor misguided killer may have been driven to commit such dreadful acts and was not responsible for his or her actions. Still others will adopt the viewpoint that anything less than outright condemnation constitutes approval of these brutal murders.

The problem of presentation is aggravated by the need for the parties involved to justify themselves. The process of self-justification goes hand in hand with a process of myth-making. This process is not necessarily a conscious one but the beliefs so created are usually very strong. Indeed they often assume the status of undebatable truth. Since the rise of liberalism this process has gone hand in hand with a counter-trend of destroying what are perceived to be myths. These myths have, usually, been the dearly held beliefs of other groups. An interesting facet of this process is that such groups are often perceived as hostile to the myth destroying group[9].

The area which sees the greatest myth formation is in the region of conflict. Furthermore, if one is not a member of the in group and has a desire to become part of such group, is easy to place the blame for problems, and especially wars, on the ruling group. This is a simplistic approach which assumes that those who start wars are irrational or that wars can be traced to simple causes[9]. Unfortunately this arrogance does not stop there. The assumption is made that once we are in power peace will follow as a matter of course. It should be noted that implicit in this assumption is an intention become the rulers or part of the ruling group. One such group were the *philosophes* who held this view prior to the French Revolution (1789).The problem was that once the French Revolution occurred peace was not established. Rather wars got more destructive and affected more and more people. The cause was held to justify all sorts of atrocities from wholesale foraging and the attendant looting and pillage of non-French peasants to the near ultimate in coercive war administration, the Committee of Public Safety and its attendant 'Reign of Terror'[10]. What had happened to the restraints on war, such as they were, which had characterised warfare in Europe since the end of Thirty Years War (1618-1648)[11]?

In essence, the French Revolution had disrupted the European moral community[12]. Two moral communities now existed where previously there had been one. In moral terms Europe had reverted to the situation which had prevailed during the Thirty Years War[13]. There now existed in Europe, two groups who, as in Thirty Years War, did not see each other as moral persons. The nature of the groups had changed from two groups

who disagreed on the interpretation of the same religious text to two groups who followed or support two different secular doctrines monarchism and republicanism[14].

One effect of the existence of two moral communities at war with one another is the lapse of restraints and the creation of a spiral of atrocity and counter-atrocity. Another effect is that warfare continues until one side collapses and is destroyed[15]. Alternatively the conflict pauses due to exhaustion and the struggle is resumed when both sides have managed to recover and collect the resources necessary to wage war. Sometimes, and this is rare, the conflict manages to engender mutual respect and leads the creation of a moral community. This creation of a moral community then allows the conflict to be settled.

The effect of the existence of two moral communities is the creation of two moral out groups. The out group comes to viewed as not being moral persons. It is then short step to viewing members of that group as beasts or sub-human. Then one can kill them, the women can be raped and their property stolen with a clear conscience[16]. The same acts, when performed within the same moral community, invoke retribution and guilt.

However, because the other is not seen as a moral person, there is no common ground for reaching agreement without resorting to violence as this would be the only language which both sides would be able to understand. The problem is further aggravated by the fact that even if agreements are reached because the parties involved do not regard each other as moral persons, the agreements would not be viewed as binding. As the agreements are not viewed as binding then conflict has every possibility of recurring at a later stage[17].

If such groups cannot reach agreement between themselves and this inability has resulted in a prolonged struggle with its attendant killings, how will these groups react to the preservation of artifacts used in that conflict? It is certain that as with the display of the blue-haired individual's death-dealing activities that no display will satisfy both parties. The question then arises why should it? The only answer is that you are not a member of either of the warring factions and so can afford the luxury of taking an 'objective' viewpoint because you are not emotionally and physically involved in the conflict. This, of course, assumes that you have no personal preference for one side or the other. Such preference would indicate a certain degree of involvement.

Yet a display showing the artifacts of a conflict which satisfies neither side is probably a satisfactory and balanced display. In addition it represents the best possible solution to what is , in effect, an insoluble problem. The worst solution, by contrast, is more obvious. This would be a display which would favour one side or the other, thus laying one open to well-founded charges of bias. So given the alternatives my personal preference is for an approach which is equally critical of both sides. Unfortunately this is a council of perfection and would be extremely difficult to put into practice.

Further once a situation involves more than two parties then complexity forces its own individual complex solutions.

Each historian brings his or her own baggage of prejudices and personal experiences to bear on the material under study. This personal perspective both distorts and illuminates the past. Furthermore it is impossible to eliminate it entirely.

Yet with respect to military history it is vital that the effort be made. There is a dark side to all of our personalities. Many have been unable to control this aspect of themselves. Still more people have tried to evade the possibility of the existence of such a facet of their characters. Worse still, they have tried to convince themselves that the dark side is somehow laudable or alternatively, as a means of exorcising it, they have seen others as possessing the evil that resides in themselves. So transference is one method of dealing with the grimmer aspects of humanity. Another popular method is to ignore it. Unfortunately this method is usually combined with the first. The consequence is that anyone seeking to gain knowledge about the darker aspects of human activity is attacked especially when the study deals with violence.

This attack usually comes in the form that one approves of the activity which one has selected as a field of study[18]. Yet ignoring something is probably the most hypocritical way of condoning it. War has not disappeared. Indeed the failure to study war has, generally, been counter-productive and has encouraged aggression.

The recent debates over Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm are interesting case in point. The basis of the Iraqi claim to Kuwait was drawn from imperialist Ottoman Turkey. So support for the Iraqi claim to and seizure of Kuwait could be described as Iraqi imperialism or if you want to be nice Iraqi expansionism. United States involvement was exploited and said to be imperialistic, thus serving as justification for the conquest of one independent Arab state by another. For many Palestinians, the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait was acceptable but the Israeli occupation of Palestine is not. The reason for the attack on Kuwait, is simple. The Iraqi ruler wanted clear access to the sea, that is more territory and the resources that went with that territory, a motive that is once all the verbiage is removed, no different to those that prompted the wars of Louis XIV, Adolf Hitler, Peter the Great, Josef Stalin, Muhamad Quadafi, King Kofi, etc. Land means resources and resources can be converted to power.

War, aggression, violence, murder, torture, and intimidation are fine as long as one or someone one supports is doing it. This belief is intensified if one believes that ideas or concepts are more important than people. The consequence of this is that individuals become viewed as pawns in the game[19]. This is true of states and political movements. The end justifies the means. However once one is on the receiving end

the perspective becomes different. Any weapon is a defensive one provided you are standing behind it.

So the problem with presenting military history is that it shows in an intense form one of the basic problems that we have with ourselves. The more we believe that we are right the greater is our potential to hate those who disagree with us. If possible we evade responsibility for our actions when they go wrong. Worse still we try and blame it on others. They made me do it is a cry which is almost an eternal one.

Thus, when presenting military history we have to deal with a basic emotional approach to humankind's dark side which effects the entire human race. The solutions, as I have indicated, which have been tried range from denying that this dark side even exists to the claim that violence if practised by certain groups which are designated as good is ennobling, while if practised by groups designated as bad is degrading. None of these approaches have reduced the incidence of violence or war. Indeed none have come anywhere near their stated goal of eliminating war altogether. The horrible truth is that we are bedeviled by ignorance of human nature. This ignorance has been made all the more dangerous by the fact that we have filled the gaps in our knowledge with fantasies of what we wish to be rather than face the reality of what we all are capable of doing. It would be difficult find a single person, if honest, who has not wished to harm another[20].

The military historian, like those of the other sub-disciplines of history, has contributed to this dangerous state of affairs and why has the study of military history been reviled as 'drum and trumpet' history. The full answer, like all explanations and descriptions of human behaviour, is a complex one. Yet it is not unreasonable to postulate that one of the basic motivations, and the least likely to be acknowledged is the fear that we might be looking into the dark corners of ourselves and that the very deeds and heroes that we praise may be the atrocities and villains of others. Military history can bring us face to face with this horrible truth. Yet, many avoid the problem and seek refuge in denial. In a world with nuclear, biological and chemical weapons such denial can be suicidal. If one is ignorant of weapons and their potential to kill and maim then their coercive powers are enhanced[21]. The study of weapons and their effectiveness can help to reduce this dangerous ignorance. Equally dangerous is the mistaken perception that can arise about the size and lethality of such weapons. The tank as recently depicted on modern television screens appears as an oversized toy. It is not the large and deadly piece of machinery that a actual observation will reveal it to be. It is also possible that there are those who depend on this ignorance because it suits their particular game plan. They may wish to sacrifice some of their followers to the guns. Such disregard for human life can never be justified.

If war is to be regarded as pathological and abnormal then all conflict must be so regarded. This is because war is only a particular kind of conflict between particular categories of social groups: Sovereign

states or those would control a sovereign state[22]. Pathological or not, conflict threatens the continued existence of the human race. The scale of the threat demands that we study conflict and especially war with the utmost diligence. Furthermore we must understand the causes of conflict so that they can be dealt with. Above all we must accept that no group has a monopoly on good or evil.

Once this is achieved, then the major problem which faces the study of military history will have been removed. We will then be in a position to work towards a just and equatable society. At this point, so long as we divide human beings into angels and devils, such an objective is probably beyond our reach. Justice and peace must be based on mutual respect. Without these a moral community is an impossible goal. Unless we recognise the rights of others and our own responsibilities then this central problem with the presentation of military history will remain. Implicit in the survival of this problem is the threat to the survival of the human race.

In the final analysis an attack on the study of military history and the preservation of military artifacts in museums may reveal, not a desire for peace, but rather a desire to preserve and perpetuate conflict and avoid the balanced and fair presentation of conflict and its consequences that could be the means of securing peace.

The recognition of the need to study war dates back to 400 BC when the Chinese writer Sun Tzu wrote:

War is a matter of vital importance to the State; the road to survival or ruin. It is mandatory that it be thoroughly studied[23].

To-day the need remains, but we must substitute for the state the term us all and for war, the term conflict. Conflict has the potential to became war.

Such studies are meaningless unless we subject our beliefs and conclusions to rigorous and constant self-examination. As with, Sun Tzu, the poet, Alexander Pope in his *Essay on Man* states:

> 'Know then thyself, presume not God to scan,
> The proper study of mankind is man'

We have left the human being out of our studies and the price is grim. As long as we refuse to study conflict, and its causes, and condone its practice by those we designate as good we will remain hypocritical victims[24].

NOTES

1. A state of informal or unofficial war is often mistaken for peace. For a description of the concept of informal war see F Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, Volume II, Fontana, London, 1973, p. 836, pp. 865-6 and pp. 890-1.

2. A Ferrill, *The Origins of War*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1986, p. 15.

3. See T N Dupuy, *The Evolution of Weapons and Warfare*, Janes, London, 1982, Table 1 p.92 and by the same author, *Numbers, Predictions & War*, revised edition, Hero Books, Fairfax, Virginia, 1985, pp.19-31. One of the conclusions which can be drawn from Dupuy's studies is that to kill people you can use nuclear weapons or spears. You just need many more spears to achieve the same result as with a nuclear device.

4. T N Dupuy, *Numbers, Predictions and War*, pp. 5-11.

5. S Andreski, *Military Organisation and Society*, Second edition, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1971, pp. 9-11. Andreski is one of the few writers who has had the courage to accept the existence of conflict as a reality. The result, of course, was that he is regarded as odd.

6. See Yi-Fu Tuan, *Landscapes of Fear*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1979, pp. 213-216, for an assessment of the presence of the human desire to kill others.

7. *ibid*, p. 215 and G Pearson, *Hooligan*, Macmillian, London, 1983, pp. 207-243. Pearson particularly emphasises the need to break free from myths. A necessary proviso is that we must avoid creating new ones and acknowledge the probability that we create our own myths. As with war we must avoid the assumption that myths are created by other people.

8. M Howard, *War and the Liberal Conscience*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1981. See Chapter I for a description of this process.

9. M Howard, *Causes of War*, Temple Smith, London, 1983, pp. 8, 11-16 and 21-22.

10. J F C Fuller, *The Conduct of War 1789-1961*, Methuen, London, 1977, pp. 29-41 and H Strachan, *European Armies and the Conduct of War*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1983, pp. 39-42.

11. For a brief account of these restraints see J F C Fuller, *The Conduct of War 1789-1961*, pp. 17-25 and H Strachan, *European Armies and the Conduct of War*, pp. 8-22. For an important work which modifies this viewpoint see J Childs, *Armies and warfare in Europe 1648-1789*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1982, pp. 1-27.

12. I have been unable to locate the work in which I read about the concept of a moral community. However the concept is of value when understanding war and atrocity. Further it is of considerable value when trying to grasp the problems of presenting and studying military history.

13. The most accessible study, although somewhat dated, remains C V Wedgewood's *The Thirty Year's War*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1957.

14. This description of the moral communities of the Thirty Years War and the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars is very superficial and simplistic but there is insufficient space for the detailed discussion which the topic requires. As they indicate the both a lack of common ground and a mechanism for resolving disputes, they are useful labels. It should be noted that the dynastic struggles prior to the Thirty Years War and the so-called cabinet wars of the eighteenth century did operate within a system of rules understood by both sides. Further the degree of co-operation, that the rulers or ruling obtained from those they ruled, indicates the extent to which the rulers aims were perceived to be legitimate.

15. An excellent example of this is the conflict between Rome and Carthage in classical times or between Shaka and Zwide in nineteenth century south-eastern Africa. There are other southern African examples.

16. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Landscapes of Fear*, p. 213.

17. The conflicts between the Dutch-speaking Eastern Frontier farmers and the San and the Xhosa had this characteristic. It is doubtful if either side understood one another. It was this lack of understanding that was one of the major causes of the perpetual conflict.

18. If this argument was pursued logically then doctors condone disease, rape crisis centres, rape, sociologists and social historians, poverty, human degradation, unemployment and so one could go on. It is the very rational dislike of violence and the irrational response that hopes it will go away that leads to the charge that a military historian must approve of war.

19. See P Johnson, *Intellectuals*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1988, p. 342.

20. A Storr, *Human Aggression*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1982, p.164 and Yi-Fu Tuan, *Landscapes of Fear*, p. 213.

21. An examination of the captions of photographs showing German and Italian weaponry prior to the Second World War (1939-1945) shows that it was thought that artillery and other weapons depicted was modern. The bulk of the German and Italian equipment was actually of First World War (1914-1918) vintage or design. The equipment of the British and French Armies was comparable but both the public and politicians were ignorant of this. This ignorance fuelled the policy of appeasement. For a comparative study of military effectiveness between the First and Second World Wars see A R Millet and W Murray, *Military Effectiveness, Volume II: The*

Interwar Period, Allen and Unwin, Boston, 1988.

22. M Howard, *The Causes of Wars*, p. 11.

23. Sun Tzu, *The Art Of War*, translated by S B Griffith, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1971, p. 63.

24. In a paper like this it is of difficult to trace the exact source of ideas and concepts. I therefore append a list of works consulted but not directly cited. G Adhikari, *Conflict and Civilisation*, Vikas, New Delhi, 1981; B Buzan, *People, States, & Fear*, Wheatsheaf Books, Brighton, 1983; P Calvert, *The Concept of Class*, Hutchinson, London, 1982; B Campbell, *Human Ecology*, Heinemann, London, 1983; P Colinvaux, The Fates of Nations, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1983; C Emsley, *Policing and its Context 1750-1870*, MacMillian, 1983; P H Frankel, *Pretoria's Praetorians*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984; K W Grundy, *The Militarization of South African Politics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1988; V D Hanson, *The Western Way of War*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1989; L Kuper, *Genocide*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1981; W H McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1977; R E Rubenstein, *Alchemists of Revolution*, Basic Books, New York, 1987; D Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam*, Presido, Novato, CA, 1986; B Semmel, eds, *Marxism and the Science of War*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1981; M Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1980;