

200th ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

Doves and Dogs of War

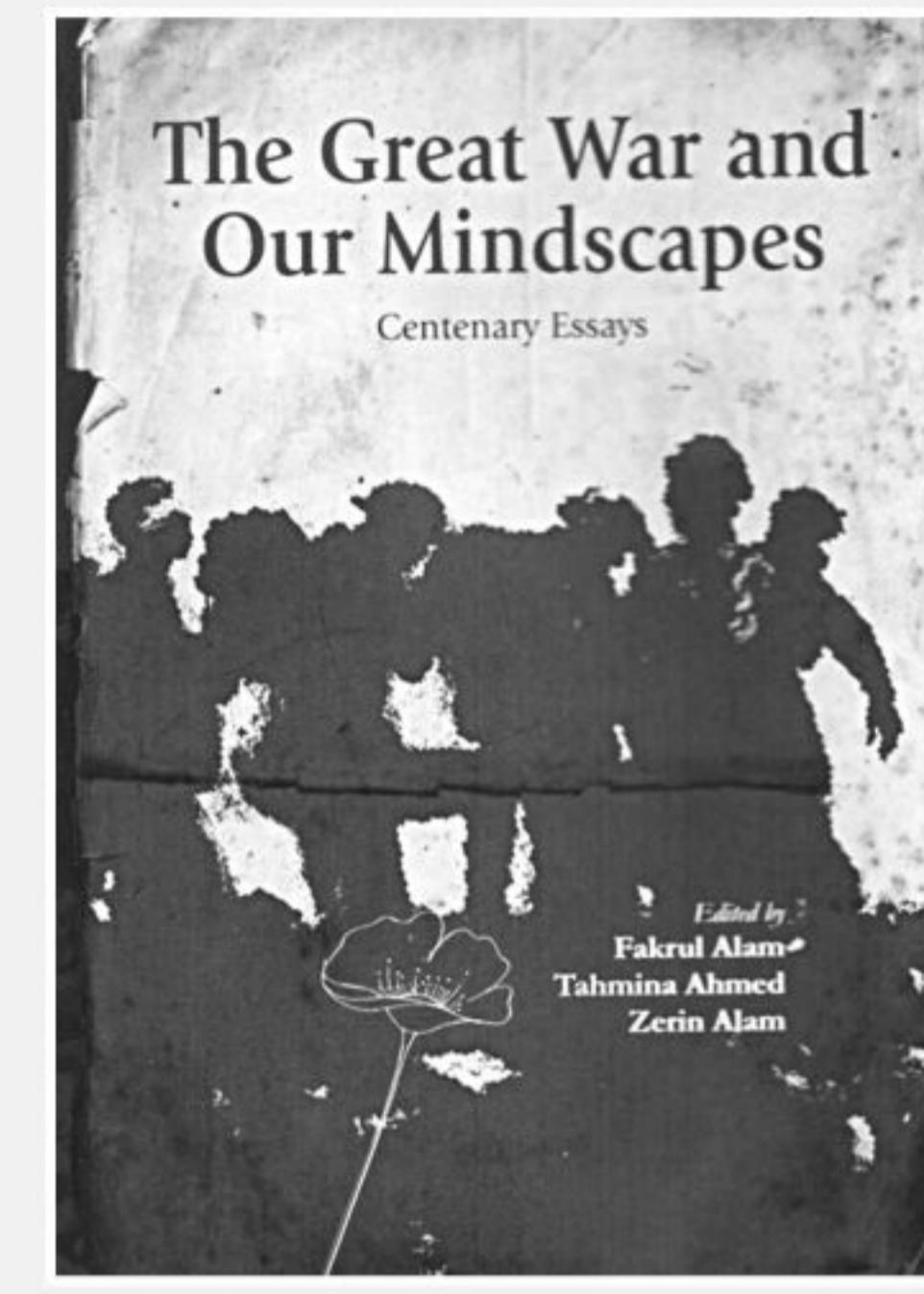
SHAHID ALAM

The Great War and Our Mindscapes: Centenary Essays, Fakrul Alam, Tahmina Ahmed, Zerin Alam, eds., writers.ink, 2017.

Wars, great and small, have been a part of recorded human history. Given the varied elements that go toward the making of international, or internecine, conflict, one does not have to stretch one's imagination to assume that bloody battles took place before recorded history. One might also look at another form of conflict, the soft variety that often precedes, or follows, the armed variety: diplomacy, also defined as war carried on by other means. But all wars are inevitably catastrophic, as well as game changers, in more ways than one, although some, inevitably, are more bloody and impact-creating on nations and human beings than others. One such example of a bloody and decisive war is the First World War, which began a bit over a century ago from now, and whose centenary of end will be commemorated next year.

The Department of English, University of Dhaka, held an international conference titled "The Great War and English Studies" in 2014 "to commemorate World War I". The more specific objective of the conference is stated in the dedication of *The Great War and Our Mindscapes*, edited by Fakrul Alam, Tahmina Ahmed, and Zerin Alam: "To those who wrote on the war so that we would not forget." We witness the annual commemoration of the war by the major combatant nations on our screens, and their leaders deservedly pay homage to all those who fought, and those who fell. However, writers have also left their mark in many different ways on many people on the topic of the First World War. From a literary and pedagogical perspective, two of the editors explain their impact and significance in the Preface: "The impact of this momentous war on shaping English studies and modern culture is a recognized fact. Going beyond the historical significance of WW I in ushering the modern period in literature and society, the sheer magnitude and scope of the war continues to seep into our collective cultural fabric." These aspects are dealt with in detail in the book under review, with varying degrees of skill and authority, by the twenty- one writers presenting their viewpoints.

In the Introduction of the book Fakrul Alam deftly brings out the essential elements of the other eighteen essays, and adds his own observations on the War's impact: "Life became tragic for war survivors and their families; politically, the Russian Revolution and Communism became unavoidable after it; feudalism in Europe was swept away, and the great empires of the nineteenth century now sensed for the first time that the sun was about to set on them." Kaiser Haq's key-note essay is an absorbing piece ("The Great War --- A Distant



departments of this country, it is the Department of English of the University of Dhaka that took on the responsibility of hosting a conference on the Great War. I cannot resist the temptation to quote this exquisite aside in Haq's essay: "Specialists in ELT (English Language Teaching) cannot relate to anything literary or historical or philosophical; and younger literature teachers are obsessed with the buzzwords of the moment: it was Diaspora the other day, today it may be "Eco Criticism" --- or is it "Transgender Studies"? His paper explores, quite extensively, both the writers who expressed their horror at the war and its outcome, and those who endorsed it (there were quite a few!). He summarizes the thoughts of Hemingway, Eliot, Lawrence, Joyce, Auden, and others, and, in this context, declares that, "Dadaism remains for me the quintessential postmodernist movement; it was postmodernism *avant la lettre*". Haq's view that the First and Second World Wars should be seen as "a dual

image of the modern apocalypse" is logical: the aftermath of the first was instrumental to the beginning of the second.

Other writers have restricted themselves to discussing in depth and detail one or a very limited number of writers. Tahmina Ahmed and Zerin Alam concentrate primarily on George Bernard Shaw, Ananya Datta Gupta on Bertrand Russell, Afroza Khanom and Md. Ishrat Ibne Ismail, separately, on Virginia Woolf, and Sanjeeda Hossain in Ernest Hemingway. Joseph Brooker ("What James Joyce Did in the War") has written an incisive piece on the Irish writer, and reminds readers that, "...much of Joyce's achievement in 1914-18 was retrospective." He suggests through a compelling line of reasoning that the Great War left a mark in multifarious forms on the major cultural modernists of the time. Niaz Zaman ("Kazi Nazrul Islam of the 49th Bengal") discusses Nazrul and his complex mindset with persuasive arguments. For example, "In Nazrul Islam's mind the soldier, obeying his superior, and the rebel, revolting against his superior, are fused...." And, "The soldier poet had become the rebel poet.... But without the soldier poet, there might never have been a rebel poet."

Rupert Brooke, the author of "If I should die, think only this of me/ That there's some corner of a foreign field That is forever England", who fought and died in the Great War, receives attention from A.B.M. Monirul Huq and Abdullah Al Mamun, while Sourav Dasthakur discusses L.G. Gibbon's *Sunset Song* in the context of the impact of WW I on the landscape and culture, economy and demography of rural Scotland. Dasthakur concludes with a significant general statement on war and its manifold effects: "The battle thus spills over the Great War, for people's histories persist, as do the discontents of modernity, and the need to write the self through new histories and historiographies over and over again." Nazua Idris manages to bring in a well-made and popular modern TV drama series, *Downton Abbey*, in which events of the Great War were sandwiched between occurrences in England before and after the great cataclysm.

The quality of the essays of the collection, not unexpectedly, vary, but, as a whole, *The Great War and Our Mindscapes* will shed a lot of literary light for sure on an event that has significantly changed the course of human history and its essential determinants.

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QUOTES ON AUSTEN



You could not shock her more than she shocks me,
Beside her, Joyce seems innocent as grass.
It makes me most uncomfortable to see
An English spinster of the middle class
Describe the amorous effects of 'brass',
Reveal so frankly and with such sobriety
The economic basis of society.

W.H. AUDEN ABOUT JANE AUSTEN IN HIS 1937 POEM "LETTER TO LORD BYRON"

"One doesn't read Jane Austen; one re-reads Jane Austen."

WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY, JR

"My favorite writer is Jane Austen, and I've read all her books so many times I've lost count ... I imagined being a famous writer would be like being like Jane Austen. Being able to sit at home at the parsonage and your books would be very famous and occasionally you would correspond with the Prince of Wales's secretary."

J. K. ROWLING, 2003

"There are some writers who wrote too much. There are others who wrote enough. There are yet others who wrote nothing like enough to satisfy their admirers, and Jane Austen is certainly one of these. There would be more genuine rejoicing at the discovery of a complete new novel by Jane Austen than any other literary discovery, short of a new major play by Shakespeare, that one can imagine."

MARGARET DRABBLE, IN HER INTRODUCTION TO "LADY SUSAN; THE WATSONS; SANDITON," 1974

Jane lies in Winchester—blessed be her shade!
Praise the Lord for making her, and her for all she made!
And while the stones of Winchester, or Milsom Street, remain,
Glory, love and honor unto England's Jane.

RUDYARD KIPLING, 1924

"There have been several revolutions of taste during the last century and a quarter of English literature, and through them all perhaps only two reputations have never been affected by the shifts of fashion: Shakespeare's and Jane Austen's... She has compelled the amazed admiration of writers of the most diverse kinds."

EDMUND WILSON, 1944

"Also read again, and for the third time at least, Miss Austen's very finely written novel of *Pride and Prejudice*. That young lady had a talent for describing the involvement and feelings and characters of ordinary life which is to me the most wonderful I ever met with. The big Bow-wow strain I can do myself like any now going, but the exquisite touch which renders ordinary commonplace things and characters interesting from the truth of the description and the sentiment is denied to me. What a pity such a gifted creature died so early!"

SIR WALTER SCOTT, 1826

"(Jane Austen's novels) appear to be compact of abject truth. Their events are excruciatingly unimportant; and yet, with Robinson Crusoe, they will probably outlast all Fielding, Scott, George Eliot, Thackeray, and Dickens. The art is so consummate that the secret is hidden; peer at them as hard as one may; shake them; take them apart; one cannot see how it is done."

THORNTON WILDER, 1938

"The key to Jane Austen's fortune with posterity has been in part the extraordinary grace of her facility... as if she sometimes over her work basket fell... into woolgathering, and her dropped stitches... were afterwards picked up as... little master-strokes of imagination."

HENRY JAMES, 1905

"...Jane Austen, of course, wise in her neatness, trim in her sedateness; she never fails, but there are few or none like her."

EDITH WHARTON, 1925

"To believe (Jane Austen) limited in range because she was harmonious in method is as sensible as to imagine that when the Atlantic Ocean is as smooth as a mill-pond, it shrinks to the size of a mill-pond... Look through the lattice-work of her neat sentences, joined together with the bright nails of craftsmanship, painted with the gay varnish of wit, and you will see women haggard with desire or triumphant with love."

REBECCA WEST, 1928

"I am inclined to say in desperation, read it yourself and kick out every sentence that isn't as Jane Austen would have written it in prose. Which is, I admit, impossible. But when you do get a limpid line in perfectly straight normal order, isn't it worth any other ten?"

EZRA POUND, IN A LETTER TO LAURENCE BINYON, 1938



A Dream within a Dream

NEWS FROM THE HOMESTEAD, RIVER ALICE STILLWOOD
RED HEN PUBLISHING, 2016, USA

RAHAD ABIR

ISBN: 13:9781533427311

Imagine a world where you are the creator and the decider. And where you are the king in a kingdom of critters. It's a dream land, of course, but for River Alice Stillwood it was more than a dream. A Paradise, she calls it in her book, *News from the Homestead*.

River was in San Diego, California sitting at her news desk when she saw her dream come true. A heavily wooded 40-acre land adjoining a lovely stream was up for auction on eBay. She placed a bid and won it. Two months later, she quit her newspaper job as a crime reporter, sold most of the worldly things she owned, and fixed a date to move to her new home in Douglas County, Missouri. All alone!

But why such a seemingly crazy decision? It was sudden but not un-dreamt of. River had long treasured the idea of homesteading, had always thirsted to start from scratch, live without electricity or plumbing, and attempt to make a life for herself thus.

So one day, River, middle-aged and single, stuffed all her belongings into a Wrangler Jeep, took her three dogs along with her, and set off for her Paradise two thousand miles away. And that's the beginning of her adventurous life. *News from the Homestead* is a book in which she penned her experience of living on a farm.

At what she called "The Homestead" she truly lived life in a nineteenth century ambience. No electricity. No running water. She had only a handful of modern conveniences—a jeep, a telephone, a solar-powered radio, a flashlight, and a chainsaw. While living in a tent for months, she single-handedly built her twelve by sixteen feet cabin. She bought seventy-five chicks, four rabbits, three goats and an appaloosa horse. And it was thus that she lived the life she desired to live.

But even before she had built her own cabin, she had to worry about homes for her animals. The hutch she had built earlier soon proved inadequate for the growing chicks. "By the first of July," she writes in *News from the Homestead*, "my adorable chicks had grown into gangly

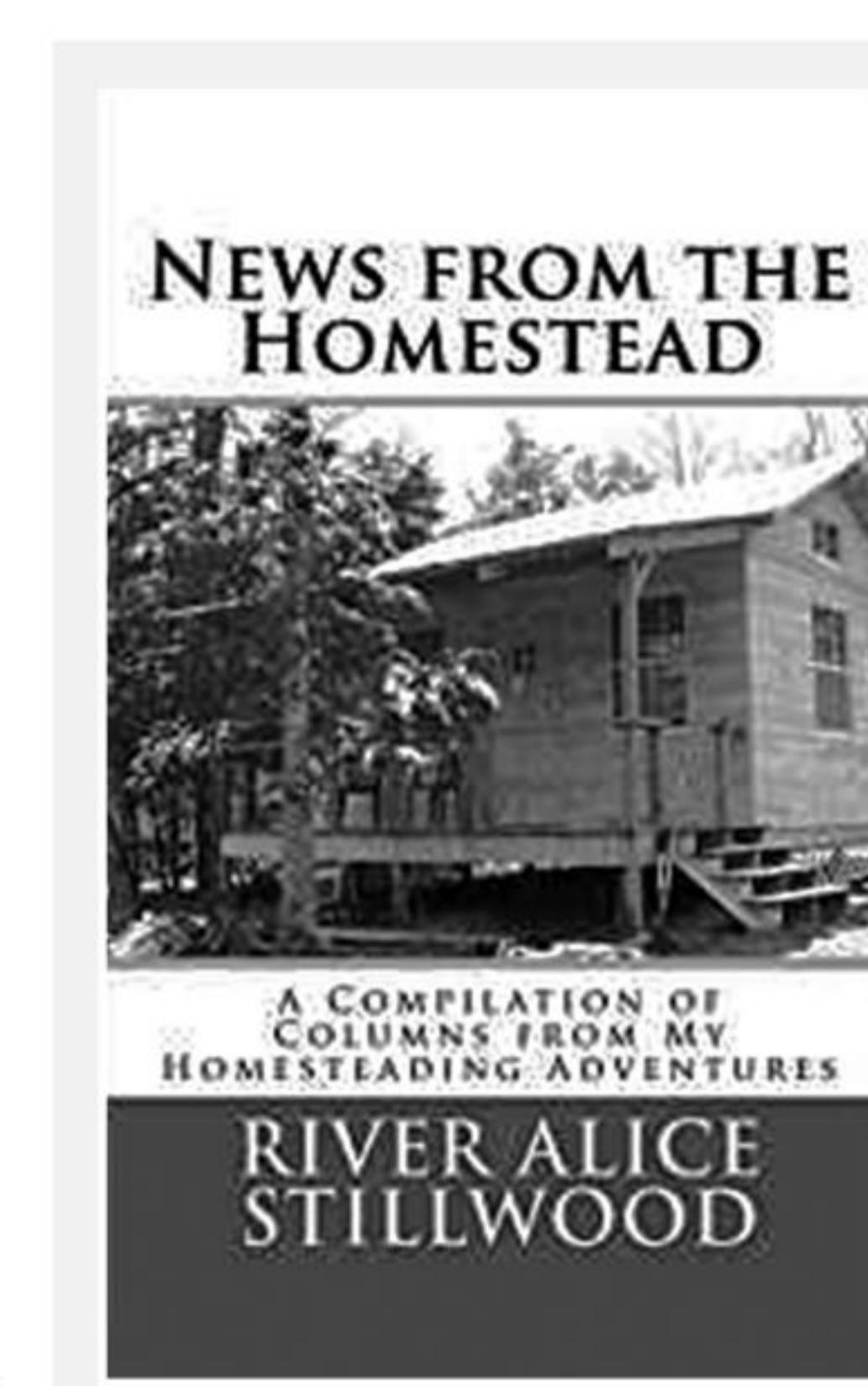
adolescents who were making it abundantly clear they would soon be sleeping in shifts if they didn't get a larger home. So I spent the next few weeks building a coop."

In the book on farming she was using, she didn't find everything she needed. And so she learned about farming through doing it. The behavior of farm fowls is beautifully rendered in her sharp observations of life in the farm in lines such as the following: "About eighteen week old, the roosters began eyeing the hens with something akin to desire. A week or so later, they began chasing the hens about the coop and chicken yard."

Cleanliness is next to Godliness, as the saying goes. When it came to the question of bathing on The Homestead, winter in particular, it was not something simply done though. A galvanized tub required a lot of hot water. And you had to have the water heated on a woodstove. One day, prior to preparing for a bath, she got trapped in an oak tree while removing its dead limbs for fire wood. When she was on the tree and tying to saw a sturdy dead branch it fell through the air and hit the ladder she was on. Soon it was sprawling on the ground while she was twenty feet up on the oak tree without the ladder to take her down. Would she have to jump and break a bone?

She rolled the flannel shirt she was wearing to a long cord, and wrapped it around the tree trunk. She held the sleeves tight and wrapped her legs around as much trunk as possible. "For the next few minutes," she writes, "my entire world consisted of slide, grip, shift the shirt, slide, grip, shift the shirt." Finally, she landed on the ground.

In this brilliant book on life and living it, the writer tells her tale with her heart, humorously and passionately. She describes her goat Damsel giving birth for the first time with delightful skills. But as a reader I was also saddened by her depiction of the eventual death of two other kids it had given birth to. These four-weeks-old kids had died because the mommy goat happened to be uncaring!



There were a good number of people who believed River would fail, give up on her dream, and head back for city life. She proved them all wrong. For about seven years she happily lived off-the-grid in her hand-built cabin, until she was diagnosed with cancer. Having fully recovered now, she lives in a modern stone house in the Missouri Ozarks with eleven dogs, two horses, a llama, and lots of chickens and ducks. But we can share her experience with her in her delightful *News from the Homestead*.

Rahad Abir is a fiction writer. He is the recipient of the Charles Pick Fellowship 2017-18.