

a, Primitivism, and the First World War: The Making of Frank Prewett. By Joy Porter. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. ISBN 978-1-3501-9972-9. Illustrations. Photographs. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xiv, 289. \$115 (hardback).

Joy Porter is a professor of Indigenous and environmental history at the University of Hull in the UK. She completed her PhD at the University of Nottingham and has over twenty-five publications. Her most recent work, *Trauma, Primitivism and the First World War: The Making of Frank Prewett* explores the fascinating life and poetry of Frank James Prewett, an important Canadian literary figure of the twentieth century who, for decades, convinced his friends and readers that he was of Indigenous descent (sometimes claiming to be Iroquois, Sioux or Mohawk). This is the first book-length analysis of Prewett's life since his son, Bill Prewett, completed a DNA test which proved, without ambiguity, that they have no genetic Indigenous ancestry.

Porter makes clear in her introduction that her aim is not to write a proper biography of Prewett, nor is it a critical literary analysis of his poetry. Instead, it is an investigation of his traumatic experiences during the First World War, which resulted in his diagnosis with shell-shock, and how he chose to cope with it in the decades that followed. Porter cites the work of Lytton Strachey, a founding member of the Bloomsbury Group and English writer who established a new form of biography heavily informed by psychology, that allows her to write “a micro-historical study of how combat-induced trauma caused someone to present himself as indigenous” because “human beings are too important to be treated as symptoms of the past” (p. 5-6). Her goal then was not to engage with the problematic nature of Prewett's appropriation of an Indigenous identity but rather to approach trauma, primitivism and the literary and poetic responses to the horrors of the First World War.

One course of treatment suggested to Prewett to deal with his shell-shock was to ‘play dress up’ and pretend to be someone else. Porter emphasizes that “Prewett's decision to fabricate an indigenous heritage was extreme, but also an extension of activity deeply fashionable at the time. Playing with identity was beloved by elites and those who aspired to be so” (p. 95). The British elite in the 1920s and 30s fetishized primitivism and orientalism, anything ‘exotic’ or representative of a ‘simpler before-time,’ and these ideas rooted in imperialism and colonialism made their way into art, literature and culture. Porter provides new, interdisciplinary and intersectional analysis of shell-shock, the doctors treating it, and those experiencing it. She explains life in the trenches on the Western Front, and, briefly, the role of Indigenous peoples who enlisted and served in the Canadian Expeditionary Force.

The strengths of her book are many. It is certainly well-researched, her introduction provides a clear roadmap for the book, and she guides the reader through her arguments. Her expert use of primary sources, such as Prewett's poetry and previously unpublished correspondence with well-known members of the British literary elite (including Virginia Woolf, Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, and Ottoline Morrell, to name a few) adds dimension and depth to her analysis.

In her conclusion, Porter writes: “perhaps a majority of the best known ‘war poets’ emerge as complex thinkers, capable of conceptualizing in terms of both/and. That is, they could both object to what war involved *and* continue to risk their lives in support of it” (p. 209). Arguably, she (and other historians) can do the same with Prewett. It is possible to object to his actions,

falsely claiming Indigenous ancestry, while still describing his reasons for doing so, and placing those into the broader intellectual and cultural contexts that allowed him to do so, without undermining the value of his contributions to the literary world. Choosing not to engage with this important discussion in her book, especially considering the issue is at the top of mind today, feels like a missed opportunity.

Overall, this is a fascinating book, one that will be useful for scholars, students and anyone else interested in a major literary figure of the twentieth century. It offers new insights into the complicated and multi-faceted life of Frank Prewett, and his experiences of shell-shock, trauma, what she terms 'soft' primitivism and the First World War. Porter uses mostly accessible language, and her writing style is clear, indicating the structure of the book, guiding readers through summaries at the beginning of each chapter. Her interdisciplinary and intersectional approach to trauma, shell-shock, and the world of British literary elites provides a glimpse into life before the world marched once again to world war in 1939.

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