

The Last Days of Innocence: America at War, 1917-1918, by Meirion and Susie Harries. (New York: Random House, 1997. 1997. Pp. 573. \$32.50)

Leave it to the Brits to celebrate the eightieth anniversary of America's entry into the Great War. British authors Meirion and Susan Harries have combined their talents to bring forth a new perspective on America during World War I. Although not historians by training, they come prepared with both research and writing skills: Meirion is an attorney, and Susie is a classical scholar and review for the *London Times Literary Supplement*. *The Last Days of Innocence* is their fourth writing collaboration on military history. Through their research, they dispel many myths and misconceptions surrounding the U.S. government, Army, and civilian population. Delving deeply into American social structure, they reveal a dark side that belies the patriotic film footage of flag-waving, cheering crowds. The results of their investigation? A book which communicates the ugliness, unrest, rampant capitalism, censorship, and violation of civil liberties that the U.S. government condoned and allowed to run amok during these turbulent years. They pose a troubling question: Why does this particular time and war continue to go unnoticed by Americans? *The Last Days of Innocence* presents the Harries' rationale both for this lack of concern and for the overall sense of lost innocence which resulted from America's involvement in World War I.

As in most histories of the Great War, an explanation of the years preceding entry into the war is required. For the authors, this seemed a logical starting spot, and they point out that America was rife with problems prior to the war, regardless of the serene pictorial images that present a different view: "The social problems--poverty, foul working conditions and swelling labor unrest, ecological damage, corruption in municipal government, alcohol, drugs, vice, discrimination against blacks and women--troubled Americans from all walks of life" (p. 21). Although the U.S. was beset with social unrest, these problems did not cease to exist once war was declared. If anything, these problems were magnified to a degree that brought harsh action by the government.

The Harries' accomplishment lies in the airing of America's dirty laundry for all to witness. With every patriotic reference, a juxtaposed rebuttal

follows on its heels. The whole U.S. Army organization comes under critical fire. Considering its inadequate facilities, training of enlisted men and offices, logistical and supply system nightmare, and mobilization, it's amazing that the U.S. Army accomplished anything at this time. Its behavior after arrival in France--despite the cheering crowds and parades--is examined and ugly incidents brought to light.

What better way to show one's support for the war than to buy a Liberty bond? Unfortunately, even Liberty Bonds come under attack as an example of a good idea that went awry. Liberty Bonds, "loans" supporting the war effort, were masterminded by the Secretary of the Treasury, William McAdoo. He aimed at mass appeal, but according to the authors, the common man required a higher return than 3.5 percent on the bonds. For the more affluent crowd, the bonds proved to be a great tax exemption: "Inadvertently, the first loan had created a class of rich nontaxpayers, and from then on Liberty Loans were aimed more obviously at the better off or at financial institutions" (p. 177).

The Harries's seem to cover all issues regarding American society during this time. They spend a significant amount of time on the racial issue, from the migration of blacks from the South to northern industrial areas, to the discrimination issue within the U.S. Army. Labor unrest and fear of the Industrial Workers of the World instilling their radical message to undermine capitalism would seem absurd, except for the brutal means of controlling the labor problems and agitators. Along with labor unrest, the plight of poor immigrant workers, exploited by the industrial giants, is exposed.

Perhaps most chilling is the violation of civil rights of the American people. During this period, the federal government employed censorship, promoted intolerance, and engaged in the civilian "policing" of behavior "inappropriate towards the government," all activities which made the war even more disturbing. As the Harries's observe, "in the quest to maximize production, the old traditions of tolerance and individual freedom were meeting their sternest test--and in the white heat of mobilization, American democracy was showing signs of melting away" (p. 177).

Throughout the book, the authors give ample credit where due in the notes and chapter sections from their use of archives, personal papers, and memoirs to supplement their findings. While their book may not be geared toward scholars, for the layman at least it's a good starting point for exploring other issues and areas within the U.S. framework during World War I.

The Harries's are correct in saying that Americans lost their innocence with this war, as did their British allies. "Americans could not recapture the

innocent optimism and self-confidence of the prewar days," they write. "Wide rents had appeared in the social fabric of America, and the experiment of the melting pot appeared to be over. Rudely, the war had thrust Americans into the uncertain future of the twentieth century: its consequences are our legacy today" (p. 9). With all of the turmoil associated with this war, especially during its final days, Americans were ripe for the disillusionment and cynicism which set in, altering their lives and sense of security for the rest of the century.

This book does more than defeat old myths: it enlightens Americans to a time glossed over by (obviously) censored communications. No wonder the "real" picture of American during this era has been ignored--the "real" picture has never been available for viewing.

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