

## THE VIETNAM WAR NOVEL: SCHOLARSHIP TODAY

*Pilar Marín*

Ten years ago, on April 30, 1975, the last remaining Americans evacuated Saigon, thus ending their twenty year involvement in Vietnam. The Vietnam War, which officially ended with the 1973 Paris Peace Agreement, is the longest war ever fought by the United States and the only one that country has lost. It was a traumatic experience and its effects were and are still felt at all levels of American society, leaving a deep imprint on its culture. The growth of America involvement in Vietnam, the escalation of the conflict and the winding down of the war belong chronologically to the 1960's, a turbulent decade, as rich, complex and in a sense, chaotic as the war that was developing in its background. It is in a way impossible to disentangle the Vietnam War from all the other political, social and cultural events that were taking place at the same time in the United States. It all coalesces in a decade of chaos, violence, deeply contradictory currents and a wealth of innovations in the arts and sciences.

The 60's saw Kennedy's inauguration and in the same month (January, 1961) the death of the first American soldier in Vietnam. They saw the assassination of John and Robert Kennedy and of Martin Luther King, the strengthening of the civil rights movement, the birth of the hippie and the drug cultures, the anti war movement and the arrival of man on the Moon. And behind it all, as a sinister leitmotif was the Vietnam War, so closely interwoven into the fabric of American society, that Norman Mailer could write a book about bear hunting (and violence and dislocation) and call it *Why Are We in Vietnam?*

As could be expected, the Vietnam War, in which millions of Americans fought and in which over 50,000 of them died, which for many Americans was a direct, painful and unforgettable experience, and for all of them part of their lives for a very long time, left its mark on their literature and art, and of course became a subject for historians and scholars. My aim in this essay is to give a succinct view of the way Vietnam scholarship has developed and of the trends it is following.

Books and short stories on the Vietnam Conflict began to appear as early as 1963, although it was not until about 1968 that what was but a trickle became

a steady flow. Long before those dates, an Englishman wrote a book which cannot be forgotten when dealing with the American involvement in Indochina. I am referring to Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* (1955). It is a work that strangely and frighteningly stands as a prophetic testimony to what was to happen in the following years. It is essential reading for anyone interested in the literature of the Vietnam War, not to be forgotten when studying the American letters of that conflict.

From the strictly American point of view, one of the earliest books dealing with the subject at hand is Richard Tregaskis' *Vietnam Diary*, published in 1963. Its title gives us an insight into the type of literature that Vietnam was to produce in the United States. In keeping with the tradition of American war literature (here, as in other cases, *The Red Badge of Courage* is an exception), most books dealing with the Vietnam War have been written by either participants in it or by eye witnesses to it, by soldiers or journalists. It is an intensely subjective literature, rooted in personal experience, very much in keeping with the tone of American war literature and at the same time with what Morris Dickstein in *Gates of Eden* (1970) sees as the dominant characteristic of literary expression in the 1960's.

The literature of Vietnam is basically apolitical and only rarely do we find it a political or ideological statement. Perhaps because the objectives of the involvement seemed so blurred and confusing, perhaps because of the type of war that was being fought, the fact is that the issues confronted by the men who wrote these books are personal, not political. Survival, fear and courage, the death of a comrade, that is, the immemorial problems of men at war are at the core of this literature.

At the same time, one has the impression that pouring out their feelings provided a sort of catharsis for the men involved, both in the fighting and in the writing about the fighting. This is an impression corroborated by W.D. Erhart, a Vietnam veteran and a poet (*Demilitarized Zones*, 1976) who sees all art dealing with the Vietnam War as an attempt on the part of the veteran/artist to articulate his experiences, the turmoil inside, through artistic expression.

The literary works dealing with the war are, of course, much too numerous to be listed here. Two annotated bibliographies, both of which record only primary sources, are useful to the student of this literature. They are John Newman's *Vietnam War Literature* (1982) and Merritt Clifton's *Those Who Were There* (1984). The latter lists only books written by veterans, many of which unfortunately are out of print and difficult to find. For my part, I will only attempt to give here a basic classification under which these literary works can be grouped. There are about a dozen volumes of poetry and six plays, but the vast majority of the literary output to come out of the Vietnam War are prose works. They, in turn, can be divided into five major categories. To the first one would belong pieces of straight journalism, books written by war correspondents in Vietnam who attempt to capture the mood and psychology of the American soldier. Perhaps the most famous, and certainly the most extravagantly praised of these works is Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, which beautifully captures the language of the soldiers but displays a romantic, sophomoric yearning to be «one of the guys».

Under the second grouping of prose works coming out of the Vietnam War we could put those books written by soldiers but which are simply diaries or little more than that. Here, the narrator and the war itself lend continuity to what is only a straight reporting of every day events. They provide good factual information on what the everyday life of the combat soldier was like. We find then a third group of books in which the stories of fictitious characters take place against the real background of combat in the jungle or, much more rarely, far from the fighting. They are, like all Vietnam literature, very much rooted in personal experiences and they constitute the largest body of this sub-genre. To the fourth group belong works which, although autobiographical, do not fall under the category of diaries or objective narration of events. They are books which provide an insight into the psychological development of the narrator-protagonist and attempt to analyze his reactions and those of his comrades to the events they are living, as well as the events themselves.

Our fifth group of prose works would be made up of the collections of oral testimonies that narrate the individual's experience in the Vietnam Conflicts. Usually compiled by journalists, many of whom were war reporters, these stories may be grouped as the history of a company (*Charlie Company* 1981) or be linked by a common racial background as is the case of *Bloods* (1984), the stories of black soldiers. Others, like Myra MacPherson's *Long Time Passing* (1984) are more ambitious, and include reports of both veterans and those who refused to fight. These oral histories, like the diaries, provide excellent background for the study of the strictly literary works.

And then, of course, there are the short stories. Many of them are scattered in journals and magazines while others have been compiled into anthologies. The short stories vary widely too and most of them would fall under one of the categories we give above. There is also a collection of *Folksongs of the American Pilot in Vietnam*, compiled by Joseph F. Tusso, an interesting addition to the already existing wealth of war songs.

Given the richness (in number if not necessarily in quality) of literary works to come out of the Vietnam War, and the impact of the war on the national consciousness, it is not surprising that a wide number of scholars is now busy analysing both the war and the literature to come out of the experience. Fox Butterfield writes in *The New York Times* (February 13, 1983) on the renewed interest in the Indochina Conflict on the part of scholars, journalists and military specialists. His statement does not imply that there was no scholarly interest previous to the date of the article, but, undoubtedly a certain amount of perspective, lacking in early investigations, was necessary. Butterfield cites the example of an early scholar, Samuel L. Popkins, now an associate professor of political science at the University of California at San Diego, who visited Indochina in 1966. He returned to the United States convinced that the way the Americans were conducting the war was wrong, but that the Communists were not «the good guys of American anti-war mythology». It is a view which sounds reasonable today, but which in the sixties enraged Popkins' friends at Harvard. Given the complexity of the situation and the emotional involvement of most Americans in the conflict, the

close-mindedness which which issues were approached, the tendency to take violent sides which was present at the time, were understandable, but did not make the task of solid scholarship an easy one.

To the above we must add the unavoidable reality of the fact that the United States not only lost over fifty thousand men and saw thousands more maimed for life, but that it lost the war itself. Therefore, as again *The New York Times* stated in a recent issue (March 31, 1985) that commemorated the U.S. withdrawal from Saigon, and the «decisive moment when the United States was dealt its first military defeat», «For a while the pain of the Vietnam experience was such that Americans suffered a collective repression. Now there seems to be a willingness to examine this chapter of our past». How it is examined, what trends Vietnam scholarship is following, are the points I will try to summarize in the following pages.

The renewed interest in the Vietnam War is reflected in the number of courses taught on different aspects of the conflict in universities across the United States. They range from the purely historical to the purely literary, not forgetting the study of the media coverage both during and after the war, and of the films based on the conflict. The situation now is a far cry from what it was in 1970, when a survey made by the *New York Times* found that there was not a single scholar in the country who devoted most of his or her time to the study of Vietnam. Although the situation had changed, still in 1983 the same newspaper found that according to the Social Science Research Council in New York, from 1951 to 1981, out of a total of 820 Americans who applied for financial aid to write their dissertations, only twenty-three were writing on Vietnam. The first American dissertation on the war literature from that conflict that I have found is dated in 1974, and to date only ten more have been read in the United States. I know of one more in Germany, and of course there may be more in other countries, but my concern here is with American scholarship.

As for literary criticism, to date there is only one full length study of the literature of the Vietnam War. It is Philip D. Beidler's *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam* (1982). Beidler is a veteran of the war. This gives him a unique vantage point from which to examine the fiction of the conflict. He is also a university professor. The fact is that a good number of Vietnam veterans are now teaching courses and doing scholarly work on the war they so well know, This is a proof that the so much needed detachment to deal with the question has finally been achieved. Beidler himself is the author of several articles on the fiction of Vietnam and they, as well as his book, are extremely valuable starting points for its study. Other books of literary criticism include chapters on the fiction of Vietnam. Among these volumes are *The American Soldier in Fiction: 1880-1963* (1975) by Peter Aichinger and Wayne C. Miller's *An Armed America* (1970). They are studies which trace the tradition and development of American literature and they analyze the changing images of the soldier in the letters of the United States. Another study dealing with the literature of the age is *The American 1960's* by Jerome Klinkowitz, co-editor of *Writing under Fire* (1971). This last title is an anthology of short stories from the Vietnam War. *The American 1960's* is a study

of some writers of the period (Brautigan, Vonnegut, Barthelme) but it also includes a chapter on Kennedy and Nixon and another on Neil Young and Bob Dylan, as well as one on Vietnam literature. It therefore falls under the categories of cultural history (to which I will dedicate another section of this essay) and strictly literary criticism.

As for articles, of which there still have not been that many published, the trend has been from what were only book reviews in the 60's to real literary criticism which began to appear in the mid 70's. Such solid criticism is now beginning to appear regularly in learned journals, and the approach seems to be the study of a few individual works in an effort to place them within the mainstream of world literature. Given the subjectivity of the primary sources, an existential approach to their meaning seems to be prevalent. On the other hand, given the chaotic characteristics of the Vietnam War itself, the premises of surrealistic art are often applied to the study of the vision portrayed in the Vietnam novels. In fact, a recent study of the fantastic element in contemporary literature sees the Vietnam War and its impact on the modern consciousness as one of the causes for the proliferation of the fantastic in current literary works.

What is therefore interesting in current literary scholarship of the literature of the Indochinese conflict is the fact that it is finally being treated as *literature*, it is being studied as such and seen as part and continuation of a body which is not even limited to American war literature. Existential problems, the universal concerns of man, structure, vision of the universe, all are themes present in these works which, though coloured by the special circumstances of the war, transcend it and can be universalized.

As I mentioned earlier, the Vietnam War is linked in time and memory to the decade of the 60's. Therefore, any study of the literature of the conflict demands of the student or author a knowledge of the cultural mood of the decade that saw its development. Among the many texts that provide useful information is *The Sixties* (1982), edited by Gerald Howard. The volume gives us a collection of relevant articles on the period by authors that include Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Baldwin, Mailer, MacLuhan, Tom Wolfe, Susan Sontag, and many others. It gives us a marvellous and sometimes surprising insight into the supposedly optimistic, hopeful 1960's. Joan Didion's book *The White Album* (1972), and her *Slouching towards Bethlehem* (1961), although intensely personal and centered in scenes of California life provide an interesting if rather depressing view of the mood of the States in those days. The fact that they necessarily lack perspective makes the vision of the 60's one of chaos which, from our perspective in the 80's, is very interesting.

William L. O'Neill in *Coming Apart* (1971) starts his analysis of the decade with the Eisenhower administration and he reviews the main events of the sixties, creating a socio-cultural analysis of the country, quite interesting as background to the literature. *America in Our Time* (1976) by Godfrey Hodgson follows roughly the same approach as O'Neill, but it places a stronger emphasis on intellectual history. This is the case also for Morris Dickstein's *Gates of Eden* (1977) which is very definitely a cultural history, very much centered on literature and using

historical events only as background. Of course all the books mentioned above make constant references to the Vietnam War and its impact on American culture.

Another valuable study for those interested in the Vietnam War is James C. Wilson's *Vietnam in Prose and Film* (1982) of which the title is sufficiently explicit. The study of films on Vietnam is, in fact, interesting as the reflection of the mood of the country. As *The New York Times* pointed out, the most common outlook reflected in films is the calculatedly apolitical one. Rather than raise the still divisive issue of the right or wrong of American intervention in Vietnam, they concentrate on the experiences of the individual soldier, a point which they have in common with the novels. That may be why, again according to the *New York Times*, a recent poll of Vietnam veterans showed that their favorite films were *Coming Home* and *The Green Berets*. In obviously such disparate films, the Vietnam veteran is a hero and a victim. This fact may explain the results of the poll. In my conversations with Vietnam veterans who are also writers and scholars, I have found out that they admire *Apocalypse Now* for its recreation of the mood of the war (except for the case of Kurtz's character) and they intensely dislike *Missing in Action* and *Rambo* which they regard as totally fantastic. According to John Milivis, who co-authored *Apocalypse Now*, what the country is looking for, ten years after the war, is the figure of a hero, and he adds that «because he lost the most, because he did it seemingly for nothing (the Vietnam veteran) will become the most romanticized war hero in American literature» (*The New York Times*, March 31, 1985). Although ostensibly dealing with World War II and Korea respectively, other films and novels like *Catch 22* and *M.A.S.H.* are really about Vietnam. Like the novels written by veterans, while defending the individual soldier, they present an attack on war in general, and, also like the novels, they are void of any ideological content.

I will finish my short survey of Vietnam scholarship with a review of some works by historians. They are a must for the literary scholar because they provide a necessary and invaluable background to the study of the literature. We must never forget that we are dealing with a literature which is rooted in personal experience, so that it gives a view of the war that is both realistic and, of necessity, partial. The historians give us both the overall view and the detachment of commentary against which we can analyze the personal experience of the individual. In fact they are now examining many of the questions which have troubled the veterans and which until recently were unasked and unanswered, partly due to the «collective repression» to which *The New York Times* refers and partly because of earlier lack of information. Some of those questions are: How did the U.S. get involved in Vietnam? Why did 57,939 Americans die there? Why did the Communists win? What were the lessons of the war? Today the historians not only try to find the answers to these and other questions, but they do so without attempting to prove whether the war was a noble cause or not.

From the historical point of view, an essential source of information about the U.S. role in Vietnam is the official Defense Department history, popularly known as «The Pentagon Papers», which contain data on American involvement in Vietnam since its beginnings. Of the three editions of the «Papers», the one

considered best by historians is the Defense Department edition in twelve volumes. Its title is *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967*. This is, of course, highly specialized reading. Among the basic texts is Leslie H. Gelb's and Richard K. Betts's *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (1979). It maintains that contrary to American popular assumption that the U.S. could easily win the war, Presidents from Kennedy to Nixon never had a plan to win in Vietnam. As Betts and Gelb assert «American leaders were convinced that they had to prevent the loss of Vietnam to Communism and until May 1975 they did just that». The Presidents always refused to pay enough of the costs to make a clear and quick victory possible, but until the end they always paid the cost of preventing a Communist victory. It's a thesis supported by other books and articles on the Vietnam War.

One of the most widely read books on Vietnam history is Guenter Lewy's *America in Vietnam* (1978) which traces U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia from the 50's on. The United States appear as trapped from the beginning, with the Communists always controlling not only when and how to fight, but consequently the rhythm of American escalation. Lewy also finds that all Presidents (including Johnson) were reluctant to go all the way for a decisive victory. He seems to put a great deal of the blame on the generals for their mismanagement of a conflict which was tactically different from any fought before.

Several books by journalists make interesting reading and give a more «chatty» account of the struggle. Stanley Karnow's *Vietnam* (1983) again underlines the refusal of successive Presidents to make an all out effort in the war. He stresses how the Communists saw the war as the continuation of 2,000 years of resistance to foreign domination and were ready to accept limitless losses, while the U.S. simply was not ready to pay that much of a price for victory. He maintains it was a war nobody won, a statement not accepted by Norman Podhoretz who, in a recent article: «The Vietnam Experience» (*Current* September 1984) sees the outcome of the war as a clear Communist victory. David Habelstram, also a journalist and the author of *The Best and the Brightest*, a study of the men of the Kennedy administration, wrote *Vietnam: The Making of a Quagmire* (1970) which traces the relentless closing of a deadly trap into which the U.S. fell. Michael McLearn, the first TV correspondent to write from Vietnam, includes in his *The Ten Thousand Day War* interviews with those involved on both sides of the fighting. His account is interesting and full of human details.

Among the histories written by the military are General Westmoreland's *A Soldier Reports* (1976) and Colonel Dave R. Palmer's *Summons of the Trumpet* (1978) both interesting to follow the course of the war and its tactical details. David G. Marr has written two books, *Vietnamese Anti-Colonialism, 1885-1925* (1971) and *Vietnamese Tradition on Trail, 1920-1945* (1981) showing how the Communists under Ho-Chi-Minh were able to build their strength in the 1930's and 40's by appealing to the traditional Vietnamese nationalism. A thesis confirmed by William Dniker in *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (1981). One other book (and there are many more) which provides an insight into the psychology of the Vietnamese is J. Herring's *Silence Was a Weapon*. The memoirs of an American intelligence officer in a Vietnamese village, it explains how for the

Vietnamese peasant the world ends at the limits of his village, and anybody from beyond is equally a foreigner. It explains the, for the American soldier, baffling indifference on the part of the peasant as to who won the war.

The above books show another new trend in Vietnam scholarship: the interest in the study of the enemy both from the tactical and the psychological points of view. The discoveries made by the scholars confirm what the soldiers who wrote about the war always stressed: that their enemy was the great unknown. No serious study of the North Vietnamese was done during the war and, on the other hand, because of the nature of the conflict and the language and cultural barriers, the American soldier never came to even slightly know his enemy.

A couple of general books on American involvement in Vietnam are Gloria Emerson's *Winners and Losers* (1972) and Frances Fitzgerald's *Fire in the Lake* (1972). Fitzgerald analyses the impact the arrival of the Americans caused on Vietnamese culture, and her book, although slightly dated in her glamorization of the Viet Cong, remains useful reading, Emerson's book is a series of interviews both with Vietnamese and ex-G.I.'s with, as should be expected from its author, a strong pacifist bias. Mary Mac Carthy's hysterical, inaccurate *The Seventeenth Degree* (1967) can only be described as the most cruel, derogatory book ever written on the combatants of either side.

The renewed interest in Vietnam scholarship in the United States may be, of course, the result of the need of a country to come to terms with a dark chapter in its history and the traumatic fact of its first military defeat. But it is clear that with history as well as with literature there is a need for a certain objectivity, a certain distance from the events. That objectivity is found now in the approach to both history and the literature that portrays that history as it was lived by an individual. There is no need any more to take sides; historical facts can be analyzed coldly and literary works judged from a purely literary point of view. Practically none of the students taking courses on Vietnam were born when the war was at its worst, and those teaching them, even the Vietnam veterans, have achieved the necessary detachment. The scholarship produced at the height of the American involvement in Vietnam must be approached in view of subsequent events and more recent research. We must recall that much valuable information about the development of the war has not been made available until very recently.

Of course, the wounds remain and opinions are still divided. Not long ago, a university professor who specializes in Vietnam literature, was quoted as saying about the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington: «These monuments are the closest thing we have to a common text. I think of them as a kind of narrative that we as a nation are still learning how to read».