

The High Price of Poetry

Glenn Willett Clark

The Socialist who finds his children playing with soldiers is usually upset, but he is never able to think of a substitute for the tin soldiers; tin pacifists somehow won't do. Hitler . . . knows that human beings *don't* only want comfort, safety, short working-hours, hygiene, birth-control and, in general, common sense; they also . . . want struggle and self-sacrifice, not to mention drums, flags and loyalty-parades.

(A review of *Mein Kampf*)¹
George Orwell, 1940



Adolph Hitler was barely one month old when my father, Walter Edward Clark, now still living, was born on 31 May 1889. When he was fifteen, in 1904, Father started to farm on his own in Idaho. Hitler was then a choirboy in Austria, avidly aspiring to become a priest. Only six years earlier, the United States had been engaged in a "splendid little war" on the largest Carribean island — at the enthusiastic urging of William Randolph Hearst and Teddy Roosevelt. As a child, then, Father had witnessed both the end of the separate wars waged by Washington against the Plains Indians and the Utah Mormons and the beginning of wars waged overseas. (Our officials could always find new enemies, whether foreign or domestic.)

In Father's early years, our nation's foreign wars were simply irrelevant to the Mormons. The Saints, after all, had just fought their own war — long, costly, and tragic — against the United States, a "just war," as they believed.

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¹ "The Quotable Orwell," *Time*, 28 Nov. 1983, p. 54.

Plainly, he could hardly take the position that all participation in conflict was evil, though he abhorred violence. For ninety years now, he has pulled noxious weeds and tended his immaculate garden but kept his peace about our nation's state of war or peace, leaving in the hands of God the outcome of the seven wars he has watched his country wage. His was, if I may say so, a semi-Quaker conscience, leavened by *Candide*.

In Father's first decade, as it developed, and in the following one also, the nation was at "peace" in all practical ways, the Plains Indians having been broken along with the Mormons. Most thought, during these years of American expansion, that violence should be ameliorated but certainly not eliminated. For his renowned efforts at peacemaking — as between the Russian Czar and the Japanese Emperor — Theodore Roosevelt would win the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1906. It was Frank Kellogg, Coolidge's Secretary of State, who would later make the inherently futile effort to "outlaw" war.

For yet another of his attempts to ameliorate violence, also made in 1905, T. R. ought to have received more acclaim than he did. Around the turn of the century, Swarthmore College athletic teams were known as the "Fighting Quakers." Neither they nor their rivals at the University of Pennsylvania were above slipping in a "ringer" or two as the all-important annual football game was played. The Penn-Swarthmore conflict was so brutal and bloody in 1905 that Roosevelt, from the "bully pulpit" of the Oval Office, threatened to suspend American college football.²

Our nation could assemble an army of Amazons too. Even women who wield the pen are not necessarily pacific. In an earlier age, Willa Cather could laud the gridiron sport in these extravagant terms:

Of course it is brutal. So is Homer brutal, and Tolstoi; that is, they all alike appeal to the crude savage instincts of men. We have not outgrown all our old animal instincts yet, heaven grant we never shall! The moment that, as a nation, we lose brute force, or an admiration for brute force, from that moment poetry and art are forever dead among us, and we will have nothing but grammar and mathematics left. The only way poetry can ever reach one is through one's brute instincts. . . . A good football game is an epic, it rouses the oldest parts of us. Poetry is great only in that it suggests action and rouses great emotions. The world gets all its great enthusiasms and emotions from pure strains of sinew.³

The First Great War, the scourge of Father's European contemporaries — the mindless, heedless, futile killing of an entire generation of young men, millions of conscript combatants largely, one by one — occurred in the decade after his graduation from Fielding Academy in Paris, Idaho. Young men did come home in caskets, clad in something other than the robes of the holy priesthood.

What followed next, predictable though unforeseen, was the flowering of embittered passion on the part of the pauperized and degraded German middle

² Burton R. Clark, *The Distinctive College: Antioch, Reed & Swarthmore* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1970), p. 181.

³ Quoted in "Nebraska, Plainly," *Time*, 5 Dec. 1983, p. 81.

class — for want of our heed to the Gospels' injunction that love and respect should be extended even to those with whom we must differ.

Before Christmas 1941, our nation was at war again, contesting for a cause to which even a Quaker could comfortably contribute arms—or at least “other grain,” as gunpowder was euphemistically termed in Benjamin Franklin's Philadelphia.⁴ It became patently obviously in 1942 that Americans also sought “struggle and self-sacrifice, not to mention drums, flags and loyalty-parades.” We were intuitively aware that the demented postcard artist from Upper Austria had done this. We knew, somehow, that this war was about Hitler and the Jews.

At the age of seven, I was passionately patriotic. This was the radio war, brought to us by a medium in which mere images of reality are often, and easily, evoked. (The Viet Nam war of my young adult life was a TV spectacular, in living-room color. The shift in our national attitudes may somewhat hinge on that difference.) When the national anthem blared forth many times each day, I would dash to a hardware-store calendar hung behind a kitchen door, which pictured Old Glory unfurled to the breeze. On one occasion, my playful older brother Alan had taped a picture of *Der Führer* over the image of our flag. I saluted reflexively, then reacted with horror and apoplectic anger at the perpetrator of this blasphemy.

We held abstractly that the Jews were the chosen people at least as much as we were. But of Jews, personally, we knew next to nothing. We children, at least, had heard of only three or four who were ever seen in Bear Lake Valley. One could seem to be, literally, the Wandering Jew of legend — a dealer in pelts, hides, and carrion. The farmers needed his services but freely gave vent to anti-Semitic utterances when they discussed his prices. Another was the proprietor of a bar and “lounge” in nearby Montpelier, a probably remunerative enterprise forbidden to the faithful. Another, whose children we came to know at school in Montpelier, was the proprietor of “The Fair Store,” selling mostly clothing, notions, and shoes. The store did not exude the appearance of prosperity. His daughters we thought of as only a little different from ourselves. We were aware that our high school English teachers did treat *The Merchant of Venice* and *Oliver Twist* a bit more gingerly in their presence. The most prominent was the proprietor of the emporium styled Allinger's, a courageous pillar of Montpelier civic life, one praised as fit to stand with Kuhn and Loeb, though a provincial.

To right Hitler's wrongs against this other People of the Book, a legion of avenging angels was called for. The young men were occasionally happy to volunteer, since General Hershey would get you if you didn't. One returned from Europe with half a leg; one with only half a face. The former, brother of our future bishop, would not become a farmer as the bishop did; the latter was an immigrant widow's only son. For all that, the sacrifice involved in fighting this war strengthened our moral fiber and sustained our morale. From among those of the village, there was but one fatality—and that not in combat.

⁴ Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography* [XII. Defense of the Province] (Garden City, N.Y.: Garden City Publishing Co., 1916), pp. 211–12.

Father thus witnessed his second idealistic crusade. The replay seemed repetitious and just as futile—though it was seen as compellingly necessary in other terms.

It was my turn to confront the Korean War, first on a calm and sunny Sunday morning, 25 June 1950. I was literally a Boy Scout in short pants (en route to attend the national jamboree at Valley Forge, the first held since 1937) when banner headlines recounting the North Koreans' incursion appeared in Times Square. The blood-red full page tabloid headlines still stick in my memory — though much else is blurred. Demoted, in Orwellian terms, to a mere "police action," this war engaged us less. Sacrifice, now, was not glad, but grudging.

In Winthrop House, in 1958, I was getting my morning news from *The Harvard Crimson*, often passed on from my younger brothers Owen and Nolan in Lowell House. The Viet Nam "conflict" began to bring us death once again in a particularly ugly way, in a particularly ugly war, which even the patriots of Georgetown never united to support.

My youngest brother, Virgil Howard, bears the name of a maternal great-uncle, E. Howard Willett, fallen at Gettysburg, eighteen years old, as an Illinois Volunteer. Virgil left Brigham Young University to volunteer and served as an officer during part of that long war. If your inherited attitude is that you really would rather not bear arms, there is an alternative to Canada — be a bootcamp overachiever! Virgil emerged from the red mud of Georgia at the top of his ninety-day-wonder infantry class at Fort Benning, taking all the trophies for marksmanship. He then exercised his prerogative as the top-ranked officer-candidate in the class to choose his service (the Adjutant General's Corps, thank you, sir, in scenic Europe, where he could live comfortably on base with his new wife). Like all other U.S. officers, he had now been commissioned a gentleman. Unlike many in that unhappy army (whom Owen had occasion to view as a military psychiatrist), Virgil was a gentleman.

The one who fell in a poisoned rice paddy in Nam was the kid brother of my best childhood friend. He died leaving none who could name him father, though many will call him blessed. His is but one of 58,000 names cut into the polished surface of that semi-subterranean black granite memorial in Washington — a secular Wailing Wall, if we use it wisely. It sits solid and silent near the Lincoln Memorial, just down the hill from my office at the State Department. My oldest brother, Wayne Walter, the World War II veteran, was visiting us on the Saturday just before Memorial Day 1983. It was then that I traced out the name Ross M. Bee and remembered seeing him heft dozens of hundred-pound ten-gallon milk cans each day.

Never a tin pacifist but always one who sought to ameliorate conflict, Father had had a difficult time with both World Wars. In the first, he had been thought too old to use as cannon fodder. His younger brother Melvin was conscripted, and thereby a narrow window of opportunity for him to attend college was closed. I think that weighed a bit on Father's conscience, however unjustifiably. Later, Melvin's eldest son, Vernell, a Utah State ROTC student, was lost with his plane in a fathomless Georgia swamp. The lack of a body to bury in Georgetown made the anguished mother distraught.

At the onset of World War II, Wayne was genuinely needed to operate the farm and thus could have been exempted. He went anyway, in 1945, to face the prospect of a human-wave onslaught on Japan. Hiroshima and Nagasaki ended his immediate personal peril, and he finally went to college as he approached the age of twenty-two. Study at Brigham Young University and graduate study at a not-yet-pacifist Berkeley followed, then a doctorate in agricultural economics at Texas A&M, where all undergraduates had once worn uniforms, always. More Regular Army officers, it was said, had come from the prairie of Bryan, Texas, than from the West Point Plain.

As a civic duty, Father served on a local ration board that doled out hardship and allocated deprivation during the war. He was always grateful that he had merely to deal with gasoline and rubber tires — not with young men's lives.

To attend Fielding Academy in Paris before 1910, Father had often walked fifteen miles early on Monday mornings and late on Friday afternoons. This was usual in fall and spring, less frequent during some winter months when temperatures would fall to thirty degrees below. Sixteen years later, he created our Georgetown High School with about forty students. Before it was closed in 1950, as prelude to a consolidation of the twenty or so separate school districts in Bear Lake County (which Father foresaw and sponsored against strong opposition), this school produced competent soldiers for war and, for peace, an extraordinary number of conscientious and currently active academics.

As Father's students — the sons of his brothers in Christ — were called to conflict and its consequences, he had to reflect that he and his had been shielded. Other mothers' sons were crippled, maimed, and tortured; deranged, starved, and killed. Was this God's will and reward for goodness?

Hitler's war permeated even the lives of us younger children. Our boyish disputations during recess often focused on whether the Germans or the Japs were the more bloodthirsty and inhumane. From older brothers we avidly collected tales of gore and horror. Our hide-and-seek games took the form of being brave Marines flushing out the despicable Nazis or "fat Japs" with flame throwers.

As I reflect now, I do wonder if anyone can be inspired to pen an ode to the ICBM! Would Willa Cather think a nuclear Armegeddon "epic" or still be willing to pay this high price for poetry? I am not — but I sense no way out of the impasse either except the character of *Homo Sapiens* be markedly altered.

There is some small hope. In less than eighty years, Swarthmore football has become an honest sport; and the college's dean, late in 1983, could find the courage to throw Delta Upsilon off campus. Qualities other than epic heroism are now elevated at this small college standing placidly above Crum Creek; avid attention to great literature does not there seem to depend so much on animal instincts as on intense cogitation and individual inspiration. Unilateral nuclear disarmament does flourish there, but big-time football no longer — though the ideas underlying each may be equally fatuous.

Spiro Agnew looked there, and saw "the Kremlin on the Crum." Others had a different vision: "The Golden Age of Quakerism lies ahead. Its greatest

activity will be education.”⁵ George Walton, principal of Philadelphia’s George [Fox] School, uttered this prophecy at the inaugural dinner for Frank Aydelotte as President of Swarthmore College in 1921.⁵ Aydelotte, a Rhodes Scholar from Indiana, no Quaker until he left two decades later, did make it so.

Can we Mormons learn something from a sometime “Little Quaker Matchbox” once devoted to big-time football and a frenetic social life? Swarthmore found its Inner Light as it sought merely to educate.

Can the gospel as we understand it so move *us*? My five brothers and I often recited the text of the Fourth Article of Faith in Primary, looking forward to the day when we too, as teenage priests, would kneel at the sacrament table to commemorate our Lord’s violent and sacrificial death (which the Friends, with total consistency, do not celebrate). We all might well reconsider those words now:

“We believe that the first principles . . . of the Gospel are: first, faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; second, repentance. . . .”

⁵ The Swarthmore College Faculty, *An Adventure in Education: Swarthmore College under Frank Aydelotte* (New York: Macmillan, 1941), p. 25.