

**War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime.**

By Mary A. Favret. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009. 280 pages. \$26.95. Reviewed by Dr. Bruce E. Fleming, Professor of English, US Naval Academy.

Mary Favret has written a book highlighting the people those who follow the profession of arms typically would rather not think about: the stay-at-homes, writers who take as the subject of their fascinated incomprehension the actions of what Teddy Roosevelt called “the man in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood.” Or if the men in the arena do think of those onlookers who write poetry describing a war they are not fighting in, they tend to figure as objects of scorn. Why aren’t they present in the heat of battle, as befits real men?

Favret’s subject is how far-off wars are both subject and, to a degree, even form for the Romantic poetry written by stay-at-homes. She opens with William Cowper musing on the fact (in “The Winter Evening”) that “the sound of war has lost its terrors ere it reaches” him, and then going on to contrast the gale outside with the cozy stillness within. This image of a poet happy with the coziness within, but using the thoughts of faraway carnage to silhouette and so give substance to this domestic quiet, is central to the book.

Romanticism was the expression of the marginalized, and the musing perspective of the lyrical “I” the very opposite of the “let’s do it!” of the “man of action.” Yet apparently the marginalized, those who think or write, are fascinated with the men of action, then as now. It is this frisson of distanced interest that Favret traces through nineteenth-century writing, including poems by Wordsworth and Coleridge, among others, as well as Jane Austen’s novel *Persuasion*.

The man in the arena can understand that people would want to write about him (what he does not want, as Roosevelt makes clear, is criticism). This conceit can be forgiven of women (in the nineteenth century not part of the armed forces), the old, or infirm. But typically he does not forgive the young, able-bodied male for writing from a distance rather than participating up close. Male poets of the early Romantic period understood that men of action despised them. This consciousness of their own apparent bloodlessness comes out in poets such as Shelley as both agonized admission and badge of honor, and contributed to the later push-back against men of action by Baudelaire and the decadents.

But the man in the arena should pay attention to the point of view of the stay-at-home. One of Favret’s most effective chapters describes visual versions of this peaceful evocation of far-off tumult. She reproduces Roger Fenton’s well-known “Valley of Death” photograph of Crimean cannonballs that have rolled down a gully like stones to make a line that recedes with the valley into a distance, as well as a placid nineteenth-century view of embattled areas of India. To the cursory glance, these are scenes of peace; only when we think about what they imply or know something about history do they seem creepy but fascinating.

This sense is one Favret identifies as the Romantic “sublime,” which was always evoked most strongly when tumult was overlaid with apparent peace—as, for example, the Byronic perception of the deceptively calm sea or of the silent but majestic

Alps. It is the feeling we get when standing on the Plain of Marathon, or looking at the beaches at Normandy, or visiting the Somme, once so violent, now so peaceful.

This sense of distant thunder is the way people with more sedentary lives are going to see the chaos of battle. For the man in the arena, it is a false perspective. But in fact, the man in the arena has no better alternative to offer. As Tim O'Brien and other modern writers on war have pointed out, there may be no "there there" with respect to war. Nobody, certainly not those involved in it, who see only intense fragments and never the whole picture, has an objective or correct view of war.

Favret's book is largely readable, and the academic jargon is kept to a minimum (though sentences sometimes go on and on). To be sure, the now-tired scholarly mantras of the 1990s (she tells us she spent a decade writing this book) are once again evoked, especially the conviction that what appears to be one thing is actually its opposite. This overused perception is central to the thought of Derrida and Foucault, and here it is used to suggest that the boring at-home experience of the Romantic poets is actually fraught with the faraway violence to which common sense would suggest is an alternative.

But such lapses aside, this book is something those in the military would do well to meditate on: What does war look like to those not in it? Since there are more people not in wars than in them (and it is for them the war is ostensibly fought), perhaps their perspective merits consideration.

**The Sunni-Shia Conflict: Understanding Sectarian Violence in the Middle East.** By Nathan Gonzalez. Mission Viejo, Calif.: Nortia Press, 2009. 199 pages. \$22.95. **Reviewed by Major Christopher Danbeck**, former Assistant Professor of International Relations and Middle East Politics at the US Military Academy.

Through the ages religion has been used for political gains. Today is no different. In *The Sunni-Shia Conflict* Nathan Gonzalez, Truman National Security Project Fellow and author of *Engaging Iran*, attempts to remove religion from what he argues is an essentially political struggle for power in the Middle East. Iraq, according to Mr. Gonzalez, is the nexus of this political struggle between nations who are using that state as a "battleground for proxy conflicts they dare not launch on a level of total war." This insightful examination of an issue at the crux of many of the issues facing the United States today, especially as we consider continued involvement in Iraq, is certainly of value to strategic leaders in both the civilian and defense communities.

Central to Gonzalez's argument is what he refers to as the three catalysts: charismatic leaders, a breakdown in state authority, and geopolitical battles. After a brief discussion of the basic tenets of Islam in the Prologue he spends the first chapter outlining these catalysts. The author then builds the argument that through the centuries Iraq has been at the center of each of these catalysts and therefore must be seen as key to stability in the Middle East. In the second chapter Gonzalez examines the long and storied history of the Middle East, particularly the development of monotheistic religions in Anatolia (Judaism), the Roman Empire (Christianity), and in Iran (Zoroastrianism). These empires were defined by their acceptance of a singular religion and could therefore distinguish themselves from other empires, frequently exploiting that difference in order to gain territory and power.