



Exploring Ernest Hemingway and Gene Stratton-Porters’ Representations of the WW I Veteran Home from the Front

Katherine Echols



Veteran’s issues are especially important in the writings of Ernest Hemingway and Gene Stratton-Porter in the mid-1920s. Although it seems odd to compare two such disparate authors, one a sexist and the other a feminist and, who by all accounts never met, they nevertheless shared a common love of the outdoors, were avid fishermen, and had a soft spot for the issues of war veterans. Both authors write of the frustrations and hardships faced by World War I veterans when he returns home from the front. This shared sympathy for the returning soldier turns them into vocal critics of the U.S. government’s insufficient and inefficient care of America’s veterans in the 1920s. Hemingway and Stratton-Porter both acknowledge the veteran’s difficult readjustment to civilian life and speak for the silent soldier, reclaiming their dignity and the recognition of each as a soldier who represents the “whole of the nation” and who “had ‘sacrificed himself’ for the survival of the community” (Leed 196).

Among the short stories and vignettes in Hemingway’s collection *In Our Time*, published in 1925, “Soldier’s Home” and “Big Two-Hearted River” best illustrate the returning soldier’s alienation and his attempt to spiritually and psychologically heal once he is stateside. While many of Hemingway’s male protagonists are soldiers and veterans, such as Jake Barnes of

The Sun Also Rises (1926) who suffered a traumatic injury during his services in World War I, they remain in Europe in the post-war years. Though Jake Barnes and Frederic Henry are important Hemingway characters, the focus of this study is on the World War I veteran who returned to the United States following the war to experience alienation or neglect. However, the veteran’s hardship is not just the stuff of Hemingway’s fiction. As a columnist, he also expresses his advocacy for the real veterans of World War I. Taking on the soldier’s cause as a journalist writing for *The Toronto Daily Star*, *The Toronto Star Weekly*, and *New Masses*, Hemingway’s columns are highly critical of any nation’s disregard for its World War I veterans.

Stratton-Porter illustrates society’s negligence of the World War I veteran in her posthumously published novel *The Keeper of the Bees* (1925). Even though she was a best-selling writer and listed among the best-selling American authors in the twentieth century (Richards 123), critics who were writing at the height of Stratton-Porter’s literary output tend to praise her championing of nature and her early patriotism but overlook this novel’s criticism of the U.S. government. In fact, critics only mention in passing that her last novel *The Keeper of the Bees*, which never made the best-seller list, is even remotely tied to World War I. Critics also

make little of the fact that the novel's protagonist James "Jamie" Lewis MacFarlane is a disillusioned and injured World War I veteran on the run from a military hospital. As we shall see, both Hemingway and Stratton-Porter explore the disillusioned veteran on his return home from the front, but because nature was integral to their understanding of the world, they also illustrate nature as a powerful healing force for their veterans Nick Adams and Jamie MacFarlane.

Following World War I, of the 4,175,367 U.S. soldiers who served, 112, 855 had died and 224,089 were wounded (Pencak 389). Within only a few weeks after the war ended, approximately four million American soldiers were demobilized and sent home. Neither the job market nor the U.S. government was ready for the onslaught of men looking for work and benefits. Unemployed and economically strapped, these veterans faced tough times, even with their government's help. The expeditious return of these soldiers urged the U.S. government to establish a system of care. Created under the William B. Harding administration, the Veterans' Bureau was meant to assist America's veterans, but was instead embroiled in scandal. Its director Major Charles R. Forbes was charged with fraud for mismanaging funds. Not only had Forbes over compensated veterans, but he had "liquidated . . . \$600,000" worth of wartime medical supplies and left in the Bureau's office "more than 200,000 pieces of [unopened] mail coming from disabled veterans" who were applying for compensation (Trout 7). Making matters worse, with the war over, society was ready to get back to normal.

According to Steven Trout, what seems like a "national indifference toward veterans" following the war was typical but still a "fundamentally backward-looking, [and] an escapist impulse prompted by [so much] death,"

apparently the nation's appreciation for their war service had failed to protect returning soldiers from "economic, social, and psychological hardship" (6, 11). Taking into account the struggles these veterans faced, it is not surprising that many of these men felt "an absolute loss of . . . place" within the very community that had cheered them on to war (Leed 195, 209). Despite this inclination to forget that the war had ever happened, there was, however, a cultural preoccupation with the soldier's "experience of war" (Todman 26). Literature written during the late 1920s explores the human experience of war and its aftermath. When novelists such as Hemingway and Stratton-Porter take on the soldier's tale, they write the veteran as a liminal figure, as a wanderer inhabiting a No Man's Land.

Scholars who are interested in pursuing the autobiographical aspects of Hemingway's war experience and its influence on his writing seem to overlook the fact that he was a vocal advocate for the veteran. When the United States entered the war in April of 1917, Hemingway was a senior in high school. Eager for a fight, he tried for but was denied enlistment because of weak vision in his left eye. Undeterred, Hemingway signed up with the 7th Missouri Infantry in Kansas City during his stint as a reporter with the *Kansas City Star*. One year later he enlisted for a six-month tour as an ambulance driver with the American Red Cross and was based at Schio, Italy. Within only two weeks into his tour, he was wounded by shrapnel from an exploding mortar while distributing supplies to soldiers. In spite of the some two hundred wounds sustained in both legs, and taking a bullet in his right knee, Hemingway carried an Italian soldier to safety. In recognition of his bravery, he was awarded the Silver Medal of Valor and the *Croce di Guerra*, and promoted to first lieutenant in the Italian army. Hemingway said some years later that his wounds had caused him to lose the illusion of

immortality but to have gained a soldier's insight. As a young soldier Hemingway had gone to war to do what "men had always done" (Stephens 85); later, as an experienced ex-soldier, he returned from war having "seen and done what others [had] not" (Todman 13).

In a letter written to his family during his recovery, the young Hemingway shares a soldier's fear about the future once the war is over. He writes, "Gee I'm afraid I won't be good for anything after this war! All I know now is war! Everything else seems like a dream" (The Letters of Ernest Hemingway 145). Contributing factors to the "soldier's psychic and estrangement from civilian life," as expressed here by Hemingway, is his sense of isolation and his inability to share his experiences with anyone other than another soldier (Leed 3). For young men who entered World War I before they were twenty and who considered their war experience "a special form of higher education," they soon discovered, like Hemingway and his imagined soldiers Harold Krebs and Nick Adams of *In Our Time*, "that they had learned skills which were unremarkable in civilian society" (Leed 3). Sadly for the veteran this meant that his training and his experience as a soldier held little economic value, or credit, once he returned to the United States. For example, Harold Krebs in "Soldier's Home" and Nick Adams in "Big Two-Hearted River" illustrate the difficulties faced by returning soldiers who not only felt alienated but also useless despite their wartime experience, issues we also see in Jamie MacFarlane, Stratton-Porter's veteran.

According to Stephen Trout, four points are important to reading "Soldier's Home" as a post-war story and Harold Krebs as a veteran who exists on the fringe of society once he returns home. First, the short story itself is an analysis of the neglect of "many former servicemen in the early 1920s" since it is set "against the backdrop

of the Veterans' Bureau scandal of 1923," which Hemingway's readers would have to have some knowledge about at the time (Trout 6). Plus as a returning soldier Harold experiences the same hardships "that many American veterans endured" once they returned home even as his alienation is a "product of the same cultural forces that propelled so many . . . veterans into indigence and neglect" in this post-war period (Trout 6, 11, 15). Adding further to Harold's sense of alienation is how those around him, including his parents, dismiss his war experiences as unimportant. Finally, his service in the Marine Brigade of the Second Division recalls the very real high number of casualties lost in the Division to better emphasize the different combat experiences of soldiers like Harold (Trout 6). Harold may not have been wounded, but we can safely assume that as a soldier he saw unimaginable horrors during war.

Mr. and Mrs. Krebs and their community best illustrate the cultural amnesia experienced by a nation ready to leave the war behind. For instance, they choose to forget the war ever happened to Harold and wish he would do the same. Plus, Harold, who is now an adult, is still treated like a child. Mr. Krebs allows him use of the family car while Mrs. Krebs tries to orchestrate her son's love life. Since no one cares enough to listen to Harold's war stories, he must remain silent about his trauma. Harold "did not want to come home" after the war, but now that he has, he is alienated from those around him (*In Our Time* 71-2). His reality of war has even failed to draw the same interest as the fantastic "atrocities stories" that had already made their way around the community, thus reinforcing his sense of isolation (*In Our Time* 69). Only in the company of others veterans, who themselves exist as liminal figures, does Harold feel secure enough to share his war experiences. Harold has been significantly changed by the war. He has matured but is now emotionally isolated even

though “[n]othing in the town” has changed (In Our Time 71-2).

As a veteran and an inhabitant of No Man’s Land, Harold sees that “the world they were in was not the world he was in” (In Our Time 71-2). He may believe that he “had been a good soldier,” yet the irony is that Harold has so far failed to be a “credit” to his community, according to his mother (In Our Time 75). Mrs. Krebs’ comment might seem innocent enough and perhaps simply as a means to motivate her adult son into getting on with his life, but its inference is disturbing. By suggesting that he fails to be a “credit” to his community, Mrs. Krebs effectively negates his sacrifice as a soldier and the importance of his wartime experience, which is the point that Hemingway is trying to make. Even as a columnist writing shortly after the end of World War I, Hemingway, by then a veteran himself, alludes to this same cultural amnesia in that is expressed in the Krebs’ household and in their community.

Writing for The Toronto Star Weekly in December 1923, which predates the publication of “Soldier’s Home,” Hemingway observes first-hand that a soldier’s valor is worthless whether he is American or Canadian. “War Medals for Sale,” written during tough economic times, alludes to the cash-strapped veterans who were trying to sell their precious war medals for a few bucks. Unfortunately pawnbrokers, who usually “. . . Buy and Sell Everything of Value,” had no use for war medals (Hemingway on War 259). In his own defense, one shop owner tells Hemingway, “. . . maybe those medals were all right in the war. I ain’t saying they weren’t, you understand? But with me business is business. Why should I buy something I can’t sell?” (Hemingway on War 259-260). In a piece written twelve years later for the communist journal *New Masses*, Hemingway angrily reports the deaths of 458 World War I veterans in Key West, Florida

following one of the deadliest hurricanes in U.S. history (Brucoli 43).

Written in a style echoed by the post-Katrina rhetoric of 2005, “Who Murdered the Vets? A First-Hand Report on the Florida Hurricane,” suggests that the soldiers who were hired to build the Florida East Coast Railway to Key West in 1935 were America’s forgotten. The maltreatment and marginalization of these veterans accounts for Hemingway’s anger. These grossly underpaid war heroes living in “frame shacks” were sent by the U.S. government to the Keys during hurricane season; consequently, they were left to die since aid failed to reach them in time (Brucoli 46). This railway was one among many infrastructure projects sponsored by the Works Progress Administration (WPA), a controversial federal agency under Theodore Roosevelt’s New Deal administration. As part of the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1935, projects such as these were intended to get the unemployed working.

Nevertheless, the veterans on the Key West job were clearly being taken advantage of, according to Hemingway. These now dead veterans, once desperate for work, had been treated like property, when they should have been treated like human beings who had their lives to lose (Brucoli 44). Hemingway closes with his disturbing account of the recovering of the dead and makes the final point that “dead soldiers smell the same no matter what their nationality or who sends them to die” (Brucoli 48). The force behind this selection of Hemingway’s fiction and nonfiction seems to be his need to show the nation “a clear and honest picture” of the returning soldier’s experience; if people lacked the capacity to understand the challenges faced by these veterans, then they were “incapable of insuring” that these men had a “successful reentry into civilian life,” says Stephen Trout (13).

Having served and also sacrificed himself, the returning soldier must again resume his place in society. As Hemingway has shown, for some this was impossible. As a liminal figure, the returning soldier, however, fails to find an easy fit once he is back in “normal” society. Part of the problem has to do with the constructs of civilization itself. Even as civilization is perceived as structurally moral and controlled, the soldier is not. Because he was trained to kill and educated in war, an environment described as one of “instinctual liberation,” society refuses him an easy transition back into civilian life (Leed 196). For Nick Adams and “Jamie” MacFarlane, only nature and not civilization is the key to his rehabilitation. Both men also seem to share their nation’s post-war desire to return to a pre-war normalcy, which is made possible only because they find joy in nature. As Stratton-Porter says, only “Nature can be trusted to work her own miracle in the heart of any man whose daily task keeps him alone among her sights, sounds, and silences” (Freckles 20-21). Hemingway and Stratton-Porter both contrast civilization and nature to illustrate nature’s capacity for healing. Civilization is chaos in contrast to the peace found in nature. Only when Nick and Jamie return to the woods are they able to regain their humanity.

As a story about war, Hemingway’s “Big Two Hearted River: Part I” never mentions war directly, though the landscape resembles a war zone. To read *In Our Time* as a collection of vignettes and tales of war is to understand “Big Two Hearted River,” both Parts I and II, as the story of a soldier’s escape from his memories of war in an effort to recover. Nick travels through the “burned-over country” that has “changed” following a fire (*In Our Time* 133), a description that recalls a ravaged war zone. The landscape might have altered in his absence, but Nick knows it by heart and needs no map to find his position, as he did when he was a soldier. He

simply follows the river. Nick’s return to the woods is his pursuit of peace and identity, something he seems unable to find in civilization, an idea also present in Stratton-Porter’s novel. For Nick we sense that God is in the details as he attends to his camp preparations. Once he’s settled in his camp along the river, Nick finally feels as if “nothing could touch him” (*In Our Time* 139). His finds satisfaction in the simple ritual of baiting his hook, casting his line, and feeling the tug of the fish at the other end.

Camping and fishing bring Nick back into himself. In “Big Two-Hearted River: Part II,” it is while he fishes the stream that he feels “awkward and professionally happy with all his equipment hanging from him” (*In Our Time* 147), a description that again calls to mind his soldiering past. Only when he enters the woods does Nick feel free to leave “everything behind;” here he feels as if he has finally made it to a “good place” (*In Our Time* 134, 139). As Nick watches the trout work against the river’s current, he feels that “old feeling” begin to return (*In Our Time* 134). Hemingway’s emphasis on Nick’s ability to “feel” once again, a theme we see again in Stratton-Porter’s novel, suggests that before his re-introduction to nature, this veteran of World War I was apathetic to the world around him. Similar to the trout that he so admires, we sense that Nick too is trying to hold himself against the current, “to hold steady in the fast water again” as he comes to terms with life after the war (*In Our Time* 133-34).

Stratton-Porter may not have been a favorite of critics at the time, but her novels were immensely popular with readers and military personnel alike who hungered for a bit of nostalgia (Obuchowski 7-8). One critic points with favor to Kate Bates, the heroine of Stratton-Porter’s earlier 1918 novel *A Daughter of the Land*, “as American as the Goddess of Liberty . . . fighting for her freedom” (The

World's Work 735). According to Mary DeJong Obuchowski's study of Stratton-Porter's poetry, though the author was never wrote a war novel, as Hemingway did, the author was "emotionally involved in the war" through her volunteer work while some of her male employees were among those men who enlisted (7). Stratton-Porter may not have used her novels to address the war directly, but she was cognizant of the war and its aftermath. Furthermore, she seems especially interested in its affect on the individual and most particularly the soldier and those left behind to grieve a loss, as we see in *The Keeper of the Bees* and an earlier poem.

In her poem "Peter's Flowers" published in 1919, the author turns to nature to memorialize the death of a young American soldier buried in Flanders Field (Richards 123). In this poem the grief over the men who died in war bears some similarity to Canadian John McCrae's poem "In Flanders Fields," published four years earlier at the beginning of the war (Obuchowski 7). "Peter's Flowers" ran in *Red Cross Magazine* the year of its publication. In 1921 the seventh stanza of the poem, cited here, was included in *Indiana World War Records*, an honor roll and record of the Indiana men and women who died in the World War:

I'll sow my poppies by the sea through
sunny fields and swampy ways,
To feed the fire in us to flame adown the
lonely future days,
In memory of the lads we gave with aching
hearts but no regret;
I'll scatter wide my poppies red a living
sign, "We'll not forget."

Even as critics choose to either praise Stratton-Porter's patriotism or mock the sentimentalism in her novels, they have yet to pay attention to *The Keeper of the Bees*. Jamie is the vehicle through which she expresses her disgust that at the outset of the war men, enraged

about the "atrocities that had been committed" against others, had willingly gone out to serve their country and free the world from tyranny only to be neglected when they returned home (*The Keeper of the Bees* 3).

The first forty-two pages of the novel narrates the soldier's experience of alienation, criticizes the U.S. government's treatment of its veterans, and recalls Forbes's scandal, so it is surprising that critics have missed the angry current running through *The Keeper of the Bees*. Jamie also calls attention to the trouble of 1923 when echoes the "bitter denunciations . . . [that] were being made all over the country of those in charge of caring for [the] returned soldiers" (*The Keeper of the Bees* 6). In another remark that calls to mind the Veterans' Bureau, he says: "So much had been taken for granted and so little efficiently accomplished after peace had been declared" (*The Keeper of the Bees* 6). In this novel, Stratton-Porter juxtaposes the calm of nature against the chaos in a post-war world. Spiritually and physically wounded, Jamie exists in No Man's Land. Though he began the "war period" the "gentlest of men," he had experienced "atrocities" that forever changed him (*The Keeper of the Bees* 3).

Nature will rehabilitate Jamie, as it does Nick, but by the end of *The Keeper of the Bees*, he will look to the church and to his bible for further spiritual comfort, which is typical of many of Stratton-Porter's characters. As we see early into the novel, Stratton-Porter makes it clear that Jamie's experiences mirror those of other returning soldiers. Similarly, Hemingway's protagonists Harold and Nick also awakened from the war with a "bewildered sense of being lost," though Jamie is exceptional (*The Keeper of the Bees* 17, 25). Neither of these ex-soldiers seems to experience Jamie's paranoia that the U.S. government will track him down and then arrest him for leaving the hospital. Because

Stratton-Porter has well illustrated the government's ambivalence toward its soldiers, readers understand, even if Jamie does not, that the realization of his fear is unlikely.

All that we are told about Jamie's military training is that he was probably a scout whose eyes were "trained to scouting" (The Keeper of the Bees 16). As an ex-soldier, Jamie thinks in military terms, paralleling his experiences on the road with his experiences in war. Coming into contact with thieves, he "frustrated the attack on the camp . . . and had gotten from two men with their artillery" (The Keeper of the Bees 31). Like many real veterans, Jamie spent time in a military hospital recovering from his wounds, but his diagnosis is grim. His shrapnel wounds are slow to heal and he has tuberculosis, which means that he will be transported to yet another military hospital. Experiencing bitterness and feeling forgotten by the military organization of "men in authority" who control the destinies of soldiers, Jamie is angry that so many men like him, who had done their part in the war, now found themselves fighting a "losing battle" on their return home (The Keeper of the Bees 1, 6). Disgusted that the veterans have not received sufficient care, Jamie blames the U.S. government's "red tap" for its "slowness," which does not match the speed of the same system that started "them on their perilous venture" to war (The Keeper of the Bees 6). Stratton-Porter conjures Hemingway as biographer Michael Reynolds points out, Hemingway himself concluded that while "nations may have won or lost at the military and political level . . . the individual soldier in the trenches [and unfortunately at home] experienced" a spiritual defeat "that had little to do with occupied territory or victorious battles" (The Keeper of the Bees 282).

Because of his prognosis, the military doctors will transfer Jamie to Camp Kearney, a hospital

for hopeless medical cases (The Keeper of the Bees 9). His rage builds and, listening to the impersonal tone of the doctor's voices as they discuss his case, he feels "as if he were not a man, but merely an object" (The Keeper of the Bees 8). Jamie's bitterness now echoes Stratton-Porter's empathy for the soldier who "had fought to the limit of his power . . . had taken whatever came" without complaint, and whose medals "attested to his daring" (The Keeper of the Bees 9). Periodically, Jamie, like Nick, escapes into the woods. Unlike Nick, however, he is unable to forget the war. The bright red Indian Warrior flowers, like the poppies described in her poem "Peter's Flowers," are "wounds on the earth" that recall the "real blood" that had soaked battlefields, dripped in hospitals, and from flowed from his own wounds (The Keeper of the Bees 2). Jamie takes destiny in hand and leaves the hospital without his doctors' permission. By doing so, he wonders "whether his troubles would be ended or only just begun" and then recalls the fire and brimstone sermons of his boyhood (The Keeper of the Bees 12-13). Jamie pushes his doubts aside because, as a veteran, his experience in the "world's greatest war" meant that he "knew more about hell" than other people, just as "having carried an open wound in his breast for nearly two years" meant that "there was no one who could tell him much about fire" (The Keeper of the Bees 13).

Heading for the California coast, a place he imagines will speed up the healing process, Jamie begins the slow transformation from a "soldier of the Government" into a "soldier of adventure" before finally becoming "a plain American citizen" who will find that he is valued by his adopted community (The Keeper of the Bees 21, 42). Recalling the same comfort Nick finds in the simple daily tasks of preparing his camp and his meals when he returns to nature, on the road Jamie too finds that he is soothed by the "homelike and common" tasks of camp life—

peeling potatoes, preparing coffee, and making a bed; but he also reconnects to humanity when he finds hope in the “kindly people who had not forgotten their soldier boys” (The Keeper of the Bees 16-17). These wanderings take him to a bee keeper’s home where he befriends a group of women who help him with the healing process: Molly Cameron, his spiritual salvation and a woman he becomes entangled with; Margaret Cameron, the woman who heals his physical wound; and the child “little Scout,” the Scout Master who teaches him about beekeeping (The Keeper of the Bees 21).

Unlike Hemingway’s soldiers who fail to find a concrete value in their valor, Jamie’s war medals are a guarantee of trust. Because of his status as a veteran, he assumes control of the apiary when the Master Beekeeper falls ill. After the beekeeper dies, Jamie stays on and gains status within a community of women. Jamie, like Nick, is professionally happy in his interactions with nature. When he gardens and attends to the bees, he feels pure and clean in his blood. Jamie’s defeatism, caused by his government’s neglect and his doctors’ indifference, is now absent.

He was no longer a pusillanimous creature creeping around wondering about how long he could live . . . It is in the blood of humanity to fight for life. Anything but death . . . [H]ow strange it was that human beings should complain of pain, of poverty, of disappointment, of defeat of every kind, and yet the instant death, death that the little Scout said was beautiful, became imminent, humanity armed against it and fought to the last ditch, as he was fighting (The Keeper of the Bees 272-273).

During his recuperation, Jamie studies to professionalize as a beekeeper. Because he will be making a living, he is confident “that he would not be again at the mercy of the

Government or the public,” as he was when he was a soldier (The Keeper of the Bees 447). Now a voracious reader, Jamie subscribes to magazines and begins to reconnect with the world. As he reads, he wonders “where [his] country was heading . . . while some of the things that he found, which seemed to be casually accepted and written of and to be bandied about in the world in print and conversation” inflamed his cheeks and enraged his soul (The Keeper of the Bees 447). As he continues to make sense of what he sees as a new and confusing world, Jamie seeks his spiritual sustenance in the church in addition to nature. As the novel ends, we see Jamie happy in his new life, yet we also sense that it will take this ex-soldier time to heal.

Finally, Alex Vernon, a professor and a veteran of the Gulf War, writes that even though war “does not affect everyone it touches in the same way,” it “profoundly affects all participants, altering their sense of themselves and the narratives by which they define their identities” (259). Not only must the returning soldier adapt and come to terms with his post-war existence, but both Ernest Hemingway and Gene Stratton-Porter used their fiction and non-fiction to emphasize a nation’s tendency to forget its World War I veterans.



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