# Introduction

War and the effects of war have been predominant subjects of cultural and political discourse. The theme of this edition of *EnterText* is the topic of war and society. In line with the journal's founding ethos, it brings together pieces that span a range of disciplines, united by the common theme of the impact of war. They illustrate the compelling centrality of war to much of human experience. The range of coverage reflects the diversity of ways in which war impinges on our culture, politics and society. Above all, the collection brings home what George Garrett, one of the authors analysed here, found to be the "ambivalent underpinnings of war." War is a destructive, wasteful and violent thing that seems to encapsulate all that is worst about human nature. But in human history it has been a vital catalyst for changes that have sometimes brought liberation and an uplifting of the human condition. War, put crudely, shakes things up. Its importance is reflected in the contested meanings attached to it in its specific manifestations.

The articles presented here have in common their exposure of the shifting realities, and appearances of realities, produced in and by war. War, and its associated cultural and political discourse, produces a discourse around exclusion and inclusion: both the creation of the Other (the Enemy, invested with characteristics placing them as the opposite to Us), but also the need to embrace those previously excluded: social groups, and political entities, including states. War can create new constellations; but in its aftermath these can endure, or as in examples as diverse as the experience of

Zimbabwean freedom fighters and relations between the West and the Soviet Union after the Second World War, they can fractiously disintegrate. This process is often associated with a re-imagining of the war experience, and many of the articles here undermine how the control and creation of the images of war can shape the uses to which war and the memory of war are put. This often (one might even add, usually) brings forth the issue of experience, and the value to be ascribed to the narratives of those who experience war at first hand. How to categorise what they saw and did, to separate individual from collective responsibility for the extraordinary acts of, and in, war emerges repeatedly in these pieces as a central theme and as politically and culturally contested terrain. The distinction between experience and recollection and re-imagining is particularly evident when we consider the issue of gender. War is in many cultures the scene of the ultimate expression of masculinity—but this is actually typical of the way that war is constructed in peacetime. In the wars of the twentieth century, lines of gender distinction tended in fact to become transformed—the subsequent discourse often sought in fact to limit, or reverse, these developments. Thus it might be argued that the cultural re-presentation of war has become more "masculinising" than war itself—war that involves women as combatants, and, as Tracy E. Bilsing shows, evokes images of women as talismans of warrior virtues.

Wars, as has often been noted, are transforming events. This is as true for the cultural politics of diplomacy as it is for other areas of the experience of war. In the total wars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in particular, exigencies of war took individuals away from the associations of normal life, of class and region and occupation. Willingly or unwillingly they were transported to the fighting front and transformed into warriors, thrown together in unusual situations with a wholly new range of people. Behind the front line, others became lifted out of their routines of

work or family, and often of place. It was much the same with states and statesmen, thrown together often by the actions of a mutual enemy, in unprecedented and unlikely combinations, equally as culturally diverse as those experienced by their citizens.

A central theme that has emerged in recent scholarship of war (and indeed in popular culture, as evidenced by the framing story in *Saving Private Ryan*, for example) is the recollection/memory of war, coupled closely with the mediation of the war experience to those who did not experience it first-hand. A number of the articles in this issue are concerned with aspects of this. Many of them address gender and class issues, both in the historical experience and in the mediation of that experience through cultural artefacts. Some focus on discourses within popular culture, as in Carol Vernallis's detailed exegesis of the themes contained in the American blockbuster film *Independence Day*, which she reads in the light of the "new war" post 9/11 and highlights the "othering" process characteristic of much discourse on war. Thus past, or even imagined, conflicts can be re-read and interpreted in the light of subsequent wars. Daniel Keyes examines the Coen Brothers' reading of the first Gulf War in the light of the tropes of American popular culture, most notably, but not exclusively, the Western. Others look at individual experiences in the wars: Alex Vernon, himself a veteran of the conflict, addresses fiction of the first Gulf War, and looks at it from the perspective not only of a participant but of a teacher confronting the issues these texts raise in the context of his classroom. Rosemary Haskell, in a complementary piece, considers how issues of war can be addressed in a classroom context. Rodney Sharkey reports on a dramatic production of a play placed in one time and place, but to which the young cast, each of whom had experienced upheaval and transience as the result of contemporary conflicts, drew strong resonances for the

specific time and place which they and their audience occupied. Ian Edwards takes a fresh look at Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, and shares with these other pieces one of the central themes that emerges from this collection in *EnterText*: namely, the conflicted (and conflicting) role of the observer as participant. This appeared in its starkest form for Herr, a journalist practising his profession in intimate contact with front-line soldiers (in a way that became much more intimate than has been the experience of "embedded journalists" subsequently)—but it is evident also in the writings of participants-turned-writers, too: it is one of the themes explored by Alex Vernon and in the studies of the war writing of George Garrett and W. D. Ehrhart by Casey Clabough and Frank Casale respectively.

War and conflict inevitably generate challenges to social order, and most particularly raise gender issues. War has traditionally been seen as definitively masculine activity in many (most?) cultures—indeed fighting war is the activity that is often taken to signify masculinity. Yet wars involve women as participants in various ways, passive and active, and both Tracy Bilsing and Patricia Chogugudza address different aspects of this. Bilsing shows that the commonplace idea that the masculinity of war is based upon a view of women as passive innocents to be defended can be called into question, and shows that Second World War American bomber crews drew upon images of female warrior characteristics that were talismanic, and in line with a tradition that pre-dates the "domestic" view of womanhood. In twentieth-century liberation struggles, women's participation was often actively sought by revolutionary leaders, but as Chogugudza shows, with reference to the example of Zimbabwe, the distance between the rhetoric of liberation and both the actual conduct of the struggle and the post-revolutionary settlement was considerable.

Wars are in many ways events that transcend established patterns of behaviour. This is true at the personal level, and it is equally true at the level of the nation-state. Wars, it has often said, make strange bedfellows. The exigencies of war force states into unprecedented, unlooked-for and often unwelcome partnerships. My own article on British Prime Minister Winston Churchill's first meetings with Soviet dictator Josef Stalin, during the Second World War, explores how in such circumstances, statesmen can transcend their backgrounds, and how the personalities involved can have a significant impact on the conduct of affairs.

In sum, then, we present here a rich and varied edition on and around the theme of war, and how it changes us and the cultural and political environment in which we live—and therefore to a degree who we are—even though we may be distanced by time, space or experience from the scene of war itself.

Martin H. Folly