

The Junior Officers' Reading Club: Killing time and fighting wars

Patrick Hennessey

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Operation Infinite Justice against Afghanistan was quickly renamed Operation Enduring Freedom by Donald Rumsfeld in an effort to circumvent its blasphemy. But at the time, Patrick Hennessey was a student reading English at Balliol and more concerned with circumventing his credit card debts. The army offered a bursary plus 'action and fulfilment'. More than that, he tells us, 'it wasn't the lifestyle or the money that drew me in, it was boredom with everything else' – the boredom generic to a generation of 'wise-arse Thatcherite kids'.

He describes Sandhurst as an initiation rite of physical endurance and verbal humiliation by colour sergeant trainers. In the end it forged powerful bonds of loyalty. A large part of the training seems to have been given over to watching clips from 'porno-violence' movies such as Mel Gibson's *We Were Soldiers*. And always the proximity of sex and violence: 'The bayonet is a nasty weapon and yet it gives the army a hard-on'.

Once out in the deserts of Iraq, Hennessey starts the Junior Officers Reading Club – reading as relief from the 'boredom routine'. As the violence kicked in and skins hardened, 'our sense of humour grew ever more flippant and tasteless, our coping mechanisms tended to the dark'. And always the same mantra: 'the familiar insidious sense of creeping boredom ... the boredom of watching as the yanks go out and hammer the city ... boredom in comparison to the tales of the medics patching up IED victims, eyes half-hanging out'.

It was 'out in Helmand we were going to prove ourselves'. Out with the 'childlike Afghans' and the book's dream-like action replays: 'and then we're bounding gleefully from the vehicles and firing, actually firing real bullet ... in glorious and chaotic anger. Actually firing. I knew, deep down, it was always going to be like this'.

This is perpetual war. Armagh collapses into Al-Amarah. It's 'bandit country' all over again, clocking up the unit's kill, and one senses little distinction between what used to be IRA, became IRA-q, and may yet be IRA-n.

For Hennessey and his mates it's about keeping 'a close eye on the heavy-bearded bastards'. It's the bottom-line capacity 'to deliver cathartic hell-fire vengeance' or, as one of his Ozzie comrades puts it, to have 'a fucking good scrap and a fucking good day'.

And 'fucking' is the operative word. What Joanna Bourke says in *An Intimate History of Killing* is corroborated. 'What compares?' asks Hennessey, describing the thrill of battle 'contact' when out on a patrol: 'The winning goal scoring punch, the first kiss, the triumphant knicker-peeling moment? Nowhere else sells bliss like this [and] I want to discuss ... whether it's sexually charged because it's the ultimate affirmation of being alive'.

So much for 'Infinite Justice', as redemptive violence self-discloses as war-porn gory-glorifying: 'Over the constant rattle of gunfire ... the air's thick with the

smell of sewage and meat where a nasty mix of gore and crap is forming in the bottom of the 20ft deep crater that was once the dining room of this compound and on the far wall a cow and person have been flung forty feet ... so that it's hard to tell where cow ends and Talib begin'.

Where is God in all this? In reflective moments Hennessey lauds such thinking soldiers as General Sir Richard Dannatt – leaders who hint that their own 'values and standards' have been trampled by the politicians. But where is the voice of the Church in this? As Hennessey describes them, the padres disappoint. One snide photo caption reads, 'The padre "blesses" the Queen's Company before we head out crusading on Operation Silicon'. When a soldier gets sent home in a coffin he writes, 'I was overcome by a surge of revulsion at the hypocrisy of the thing, the crap being peddled by the padres that somehow makes it all right for a nineteen-year-old to die if he's going to heaven.... After the Old Testament trials of the week I'm done with the religious bullshit dimension of what is going on'.

In the end, this is a story of how a bored society formed Hennessey, how boredom drew him into the army, how you then get bored waiting to fight, and even the fighting gets boring ... unless the dosage keeps going up.

On leave back to the UK he says, 'I can't engage with these people ... my people ... and Echo and the Bunnymen played as I ... could think only of the valley and wanted the fireworks and the air-strikes and the huge euphoric-trance drops to be the lift and surge of a scrap ... always wanting more than we could get'.

In the final pages Hennessey masterfully shifts to lower-case, continuing to glorify war but introducing a subtle critique of its infantilism: 'still in southern afghan i wonder what the fuck it will be like back in london and how do the men show photos of dead afghans to adoring wives and kids and expect them to understand? ... they sicken in the calm, who knew the storm'.

Back home the tightknit fighting community hit upon irrational anger, frightened kids, and confused wives spun by 'clueless, career-politician dickheads'. Where, he asks, are the public parades of glory? The medals and citations 'with our names to shout to the rafters that what we had done was not wrong, not bad, but glorious and heroic, and we weren't sick to feel that it had all been such fucking good fun'.

Because war is sick, and hell has caught up on Hennessey, the hell of a nation that has sold its moral compass, that dumps even loyal fighters into landfill: and 'it stung because there was no closure ... you'd always want more like a drug ... the massive spinning wheel we were all on, whirring round faster and faster, wanting better and better jobs or more and more violence ... for the epitome of nothing'.

The jacket cover tells us that Hennessey is now studying conflict and humanitarian law. His book is respected by many serving soldiers who I've heard say, 'that's how it is'. It's the story of the Universal Soldier and how, behind all the 'fucking good fun', is the mind-fucking violence of a fucking bored society.

And I'm sorry, but I use that word in its theological sense. Because our challenge is to develop a theology of boredom; and spirituality that can tackle human emptiness without recourse to drugs. **Alastair McIntosh**



The Junior Officers' Reading Club is available from the Third Way bookshop for a special price of £15.30 (RRP £16.99).