Recall Roster

by D.A. Boxwell

Recalling forgotten, neglected, underrated, or unjustly out-of-print works

William March. *Company K*. Intro. By Philip D. Beidler. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989.

When William March's novel was first published in January 1933, its author happened to be in Hamburg, Germany. A former Marine who was wounded at Belleau Wood and on the Blanc Mont Ridge, March was the European representative of the Waterman Steamship Corporation. Witnessing the rise of Hitler to power during his stay in Europe, March got ironic confirmation of what the unsympathetic character, the Judge Advocate Lt. James Fairbrother says at the end of novel, when he rants against pacifism in a windy political speech: "'Brotherhood of man,' indeed—I'd laugh if the situation were not so fraught with danger.—Germany is not to be ignored, either.—How shortsighted we were to let them get on their feet again.—" (255). *Company K*, March's first novel, is a masterful reflection of how much the futility and carnage of World War I festered in people's hearts and souls and made the Second World War a seeming inevitability. Coming as it did at the end of a vogue for Great War fiction in the late 20s and early 30s, *Company K* is, in many ways, the pure distillation, in literary fiction, of the bitter disillusionment spawned by the Great War, and the war's seeming inconclusiveness. But even more significant, and less predictable, *Company K* is neatly metafictional that makes it a harbinger of much post-Vietnam writing.

William March was the pen name of Alabama writer William Edward Campbell (1893-1954), whose work, while it may not be as "long forgotten" as Joyce Carol Oates claimed in a 1996 article in *The New York Review of Books*, has been overshadowed by his regional contemporary William Faulkner. Aside from the last of his six novels, *The Bad Seed* (1954), March's work is mostly relegated to cultural oblivion, with one other exception. The

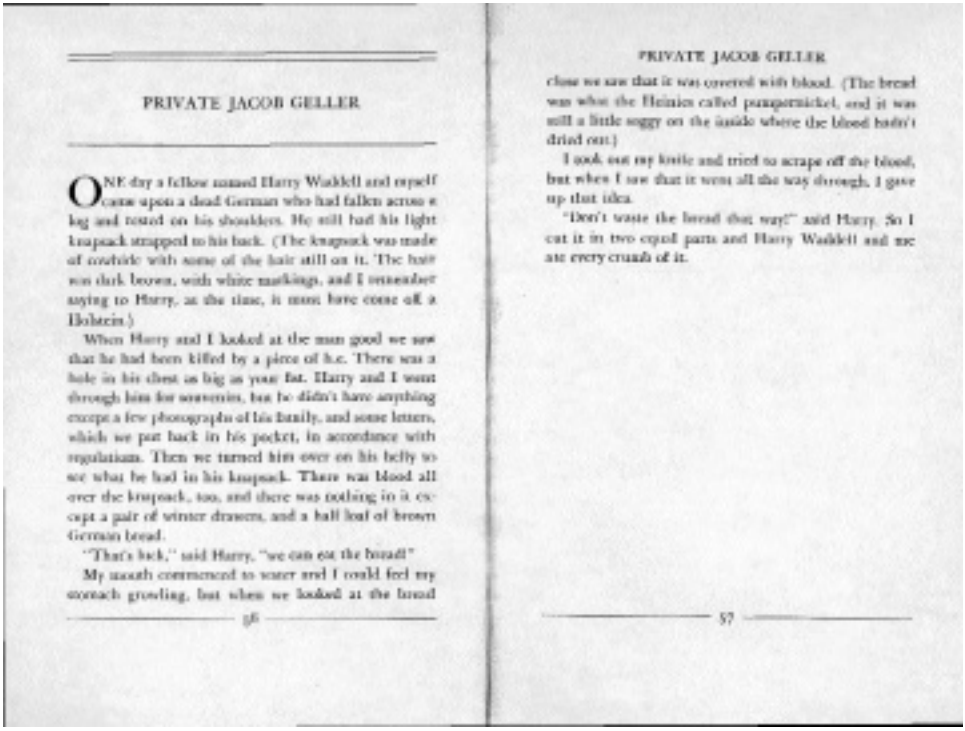
University of Alabama Press has provided a valuable service by keeping *Company K* in print for the last decade and a half, as a salute to its significance as an anti-war narrative with some striking formal qualities that distinguish it from its better-known fraternal texts like *A Farewell to Arms* and *All Quiet on the Western Front.* Before that, *Company K* had a fairly active life in the 1950s, when it was made readily, and cheaply, available to paperback reprint houses like Lion and Signet and repackaged as "pulp fiction" to complement contemporary war novels like those produced by Leon Uris and James Jones. The back cover of the 1958 Signet edition, for example, hyped March's 25 year-old novel thusly: "The night attack; the sniper's lonely vigil; the everlasting hell ahead; the girl somewhere waiting—This is what war is really like to 113 men of Company K, each angry moment of living hell impaled forever on the bayonet of William March's pen!" And there's more than enough graphic violence in the novel to keep Mickey Spillane fans happy: "Then I straightened out his head with my foot and pounded his face with the butt of my rifle until it was like jelly" (173). But the critical hosannas that greeted March's novel in 1933 didn't give the book much of a shelf life beyond the first years of the Depression, when the American reading public moved on from the War with new preoccupations. Frederick Thurston, reviewing for *Books*, opined that "this strangely moving book will take its place with the best imaginative work which has come out of American participation in the war," recognizing March's "deep despairing hatred of modern war." *The Boston Transcript* said *Company K* "deserves a place among the few really honest books that the Great War has produced," even though it is a "strange and bitter book, a smashing indictment of a world system that permits the atrocity of war among civilized nations."

The most famous contemporary reviewer, Graham Greene, loved the book for its form, as well as its message. Consisting of 113 very short chapters, each narrated by a different character, *Company K* is most akin to a form more commonly used in postmodernity: the short story cycle. And because the chapters run as short as 9 lines, and the majority are just one or two pages, *Company K* reads like a collection of "microfictions" which invite a non-linear reading, as the 113 chapters glance off each other referentially in unpredictable ways, sometimes directly, and frequently indirectly, and sometimes not at all. The 113 chapters often contradict one another, as different participants and witnesses to the events process what happens according to their own personalities, desires, fears, defenses. It's what we now call "the *Rashomon* effect." Because there is no consistent or predominant narrative point of view in *Company K*, March's rendition of the collective experience of the company appealed to Greene, who reviewed it in *The Spectator* in April 1933, a month after its British publication by Victor Gollancz. March's "book has the force of a mob-protest: an outcry from

anonymous throats." Greene went on to praise March's novel for its very fragmentation and inconsistency. "It does not matter that every stock situation of war, suicide, the murder of an officer, the slaughter of prisoners, a vision of Christ, is apportioned to *Company K*." What made the novel compelling for Greene was that it "is not written in any realistic convention. It is the only War book I have read which has found a new form to fit the novelty of the protest." Some reviewers in America noted that the book it most reminded them of was *The Spoon River Anthology*, but that 1915 work confines despair and desperation to the American rural and small town world. March is working on a larger canvas, portraying not just combat, but devoting the final third of the novel to the aftermath, which, if anything is more traumatic for its survivors than the war itself: a record of permanent scarring and mutilation, impotence, insanity, and dislocation. The book is more than just the record of 130 or so named characters, for in its very form, *Company K*'s fragments never fully cohere. The fracturing of form deliberately fractures the solid ground upon which narrative, in general, purports to rest: the truth of experience. The postmodern war narrative which *Company K* most strikingly prefigures is, most obviously, Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story."

In terms of a controlling "voice," March's novel is founded on an unresolved inconsistency. The very first chapter, "Private Joseph Delaney," announces a frame: the book we are about to read is authored by this narrator, who claims to have finished the "record of my own company" on the Western Front in 1918, with the aim of making a representative narrative of what every company endured in the Great War. Yet this framing device does not make a complete picture, since Delaney doesn't close the narrative (a character named "Private Sam Ziegler" does), nor does Delaney make an appearance in any one of the succeeding 112 chapters—he doesn't refer to his own experiences, nor do any of the characters refer to him in the diegesis itself. If the novel claims at the outset to have a single authorial source, namely Delaney, the processes of its authorship remain a mystery hovering over what follows. The reader asks, without any answer: who is telling this story? Each of the 112 chapters which follow are narrated by the title character of each of the chapters, but is the source of the story that character, or someone else? Is that character a free agent, or has he been "channeled" through Delaney, who is an omniscient narrator of the whole? Does the novel consist of ghost narratives or does it comprise what Delaney "imagines" what would, or might, have happened to the members of his company? But Delaney insists to his wife, as they sit on their porch discussing the finished book, which she has just read (but which we have not), that the work is a documentary "record." Yet, considering that at least 10 of the chapters are narrated by "voix d'outre tombe," the possibility exists that

March is experimenting with narration that has no tangible agency. Dead men do indeed tell tales, and these chapters are some of the most powerful in *Company K*. For instance, "Private William Mulcahey" recites his death by German gunfire, and these are his last thoughts: "I'll never know how the war comes out. I'll never know, now, whether the Germans win or not" (122). The reader is intrigued: who is the source of this irony? Is it Mulcahey? If so, then, March makes us aware of the unreality of this device. Or: is it Delaney imagining these final thoughts (bearing in mind that Delaney was nowhere present in this skirmish). While the story-telling originates from some entity which isn't determinate, the essential truths about suffering in war told by these 112 narrators seem hardly open to question. For a representative sample chapter, here's Geller's story about eating the enemy's blood-soaked bread.



PRIVATE JACOB GELLER

ONE day a fellow named Harry Waddell and myself came upon a dead German who had fallen across a log and rested on his shoulders. He still had his light knapsack strapped to his back. (The knapsack was made of cowhide with some of the hair still on it. The hair was dark brown, with white markings, and I remember saying to Harry, at the time, it must have come off a Holstein.)

When Harry and I looked at the man good we saw that he had been killed by a piece of h.e. There was a hole in his chest as big as your fist. Harry and I went through him for souvenirs, but he didn't have anything except a few photographs of his family, and some letters, which we put back in his pocket, in accordance with regulations. Then we turned him over on his belly to see what he had in his knapsack. There was blood all over the knapsack, too, and there was nothing in it except a pair of winter drawers, and a half loaf of brown German bread.

"That's luck," said Harry, "we can eat the bread!"

My mouth commenced to water and I could feel my stomach growling, but when we looked at the bread

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close we saw that it was covered with blood. (The bread was what the Heinies called pumpernickel, and it was still a little soggy on the inside where the blood hadn't dried out.)

I took out my knife and tried to scrape off the blood, but when I saw that it went all the way through, I gave up that idea.

"Don't waste the bread that way!" said Harry. So I cut it in two equal parts and Harry Waddell and me ate every crumb of it.

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March's novel is most like O'Brien's short story when it calls attention to the processes of its own production as a "war story." "Private Harland Perry" begins his chapter: "A man from the 15th Field Artillery named Charlie Cantwell told me this story" (140). So the subject of Perry's chapter is told from at least one remove, and Perry's narrative unintentionally, but implicitly, questions the veracity of Charlie's story about how he got given

10,000 francs from a dying soldier to spend on a weekend orgy in a local brothel when they are on leave behind the front lines. It's the kind of "war story" we get from O'Brien's story-tellers; the braggadocio, transgressive stories of sex and violence that provocatively defy anyone to disbelieve them, and yet reveal the truth of desire and longing in times of duress and deprivation. Perry ends: "Well, that's the way Charlie told me the story, and personally I don't give one good God damn whether you believe it or not! It's no skin off my backside. All I know is what Charlie told me, and that he did have ten thousand francs..." (141). Private Sidney Belmont's one-page "war story" has no single point of origination, merely some vague collective entity, of which he considers himself a member. "They tell this story on the colonel of my regiment," he begins. The story concerns an unnamed colonel who chews out a private for saluting him, because the colonel fears being recognized by the enemy as a commander and singled out as a target from across No Man's Land. The colonel yells at the private: "Don't salute me, come up, instead, and kick me a couple of times and say: 'Listen to me, you dopey old son of a bitch!' That's the way to speak to me, when I'm, on the line" (168). Yet "Belmont" undermines the veracity of his own story by protesting too much: "Later I heard that story told on the colonel of every regiment in France, but it really happened in my outfit" (168). The irony resides in the implicit defensiveness of this claim, again, as if March, like O'Brien, wants to call attention to the processes of narration in ways that make us aware of the very factitiousness of story-telling.

Some reviewers in 1933 were baffled by the inconsistency inherent in multiple narration, pointing out, for example, the ultimate fate of the craven martinet Captain Matlock, the ineffectual commander of Company K, who orders his men to kill 22 German POWs at close range in a ravine, an incident in the novel told from six different points of view. Does Matlock survive the war? In one chapter he is believed to be killed by the enemy, but close to the end of the novel, he is encountered on the streets of Manhattan as a down-and-out after the war by "Private Rufus Yeomans". Again, the reader isn't sure if Yeomans, in his one-sided conversation with Matlock, has made a mistake or is simply fantasizing about role reversal, with Yeomans now the superior in a position to patronize his former commander. The abstraction inherent in these short, punchy, ironic narratives makes *Company K* a thought-provoking reading experience. Because the 113 chapters are so compressed, or distilled, the reader participates actively in making the book "work" to concretize itself, to cohere, and yet, pointedly, *Company K* remains somewhat elusive as a unified and determinate text. Perhaps this, the greatest quality of the work, is best expressed at the end of "Private Wilbur Bowden"'s story about an unnamed American soldier who complains of an imagined, unseen leg wound, when in fact, he has

suffered a fatal abdominal wound. Bowden concludes with a flurry of questions, which address the impossibility of knowing anything conclusively about the direct experience of war, except, perhaps, in and through stories. But only perhaps:

> I've thought about that man a good many times, but I can't make heads or tails of it. Why did he flinch, and say he was wounded in the leg, when he wasn't? Did he really know where he was wounded? Or was it because he was going to die, and my questions bothered him? Did he think he would be easier to let me have my way, and put on a bandage, since I insisted on it? I've thought it over a good many times, without coming to any conclusion. (161)

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