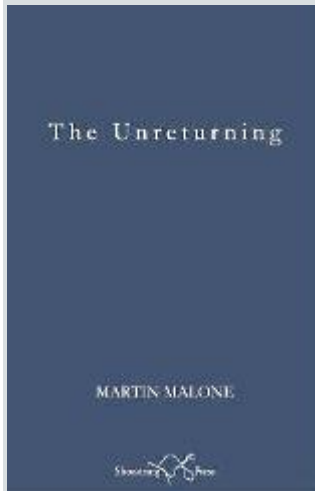


## London Grip Poetry Review – Martin Malone

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Poetry review – *The Unreturning*: P W Bridgman salutes Martin Malone's poetic counter-attack on certain received ideas about the Great War



### *The Unreturning*

Martin Malone

Shoestring Press

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The title of Martin Malone's latest book of verse—*The Unreturning*—is an elegant circumlocution borrowed from Wilfrid Owen's poem of the same name. Owen's is perhaps the second best-known poetic response to the ravages of the First World War, the first being (arguably) John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields". But it is Owen's poem that, metaphorically, puts the harder questions. And it does so in a clear-eyed and clear-headed way, unobscured by veils of sentimentality and patriotic fervour. Each of those poems has its place, to be sure, but we ought not be surprised that as schoolchildren seated in the well-ordered ranks of our desks (seated "row on row" as it were), we were seldom, if ever, called upon by our teachers to commit to memory evocations of "weak-limned hour[s] when sick men's sighs are drained" or, perforce, "heaven with [its] doors... chained." Heavens, no. Better that the light be trained upon "larks, still bravely singing" and the torches that had become ours to take up and "hold on high".

It is widespread failures, and (inescapably) *distortions*, of historical memory that are Malone's central concern in his book, *The Unreturning*. We have long lived, he would

say, with a conjured mythology about war—a false record that has been cultivated and propagated to serve certain political ends. But, with the centenary of the First World War’s armistice having conveniently arrived at a time which, quintessentially, deserves to be known as the “Great Age of Untruth,” the repotting of questionable factoids about war and its lessons has redoubled and—to our great detriment—become a revisionist industry unto itself. (And a largely successful one at that.) Thus, in the book’s first poem, Malone laments “trench honesties / occluded by one century / and the paradigms of myth...”.

He continues:

...small wonder  
the corpse-constructed line  
found its pitiful page.  
What they said of it  
became what it is...  
So come, let us sit and reconstruct...  
(from “Séance”)

The remarkable poems set out in *The Unreturning* remind us that as the revisionists have gone about their work—sitting and reconstructing, as Malone says—inconvenient dissenting perspectives have been shed and with them much subtlety and nuance, yielding in the end a received historical take on war that deals “...only in certainty, creed and nation.” Why? Quite simply, Malone observes, because “...a nation dies when its gods are dead.”

*The Unreturning* is formatted in an interesting way that contributes to the overarching message it delivers. As the book’s jacket copy correctly declares, Malone has created a “Great War diptych in which the later dissenting voices... parley with [war poetry’s] more traditional elegiac forms.” The first half of the diptych (collectively, “Ghosts in the Vortex”) does indeed consist of poems, mostly written in free verse, which are conventionally presented and employ language and diction that are somewhat more typical of what comprises the 20th century war-poetry genre. The second half, by contrast, comes to us in prose poetry form and speaks in a conspicuously more modern voice. The prose poems look back (askance, even) at some of the content of the first half, offering an often acerbic, but nevertheless lyrical, commentary on real truths as they have sometimes been refracted though systematically distorted lenses. (A reviewer more *au fait* with the argot of our times might say that the second half of the diptych “interrogates” aspects of the first.) This second part of the diptych has, tellingly, been given the title that has been given to the entire volume, that being “The Unreturning”.

The effect of this approach to format upon the reader is not unlike the effect that a skilful and effective cross-examination of a mendacious witness can have upon a judge presiding over a trial. Important evidence revealed, under close questioning, to be little more than a tissue of lies can be fatal to the case of the party relying upon that evidence. To the extent that our modern, conjured history of the Great War and its

lessons is invoked for discussion in the poems making up the first half, that conjured history does not fare well under Malone's pointed, informed and hard-hitting cross-examination in the second. One can almost (figuratively) detect a faint scent of urine emanating from the witness box—a powerful sign that the cross-examiner has successfully unmasked, as untruthful, the deceitful testimony of a rattled and chastened witness.

The First World War's travesties are sometimes portrayed, particularly in the first half of Malone's remarkable collection, in all their abject ugliness. When that is Malone's purpose, you will find no Vaseline-coated lens effects. The war's flayed battlefield combatants are assailed from all sides in these poems—by maiming, by mortality, by every imaginable indignity—and we see it all in high resolution, just as we see the despicably asymmetrical effects of war upon participants drawn from differing classes.

...Yes, how we hate you, you cheerful young men  
with your tinned kippers and today's *Daily Mail*;  
the periscope from Harrods, the warm new boots;

galoshes bought yesterday in Knightsbridge;  
your wire-cutters and quail eggs from Aunt Grace,  
and Father's gift of an Aquascutum.

You'll get used to the smell of blood and rum,  
soon learn to see, beyond the metaphors of dawn,  
the blue smoke from his bacon frying and know,

here at the suicide of nations, not a chance to look.  
Learn fast and perhaps you might live to out-ghost  
the silence of your name hallooed twice at roll call.

(From "Trench Requisites")

And, in a dig at Wilfrid Owen himself for a patch of time he spent at home in England, away from the action writing war poetry while his less privileged mates fought on, Malone does not spare the great war poet, saying:

They were dying again at Beaumont Hamel  
as you stroll Borage Lane,  
three days after your twenty-fifth birthday,  
mind yet cobbled with skulls of the lads you left behind...

At number seven, you unlatch the gate,  
take out a key and stroll up to the white front door.

Searching for peace, you retreat to the attic with its tiny skylight,

the shrieks of children playing soldiers down the street.

Here you are Chatterton and Keats,  
half in love with death's idea  
while making best use of its dutiful shadow.

You write your mother, go over old drafts,  
'defectuosities', and 'the inwardness of war'.

Briefly, you pause to listen to swallows *skirruping* their early return,

then back to your notes, strike-throughs,  
séance and retrospection,  
another time-strafered Edwardian  
caught out in the open with defective kit...

(from "Ripon Work")

Back on the battlefield, meanwhile, there is nothing unfolding that is fit for romanticising—no luxury of introspection about war and its "inwardness" or otherwise. No. As Malone bluntly puts it in "Clickbait":

"The night gets lost to all whereabouts and a dawn that lifts too quickly at your shoulder. Reduced from subaltern to silhouette, an eye narrows on the cross-hairs, somewhere on high a lark sings and off clicks the safety-catch."

Like McCrae's, Malone's lark may too sing bravely but we are unlikely, in the Great Age of Untruth, to see mimeographed sheets of "Clickbait" being sent home in school rucksacks as verse memorisation exercises. "Clickbait" comes too near the real truth about war ever to qualify for that.

"Suicide of nations" indeed.

As should be obvious by now, for this reviewer, Malone's skilful condemnation of the jingoistic revisionism that has brought the war-torn world of the present to its current precarious state rings true and is entirely warranted. We find ourselves in that predicament *despite* the real lessons that have been there all along to be distilled from unrefracted, unadulterated Great War history. The *Unreturning* must therefore be celebrated—as a powerful and important contribution to a counternarrative that is voiced too thinly by a small chorus of modern war poets in these fraught times. In a word, Malone's war history scholarship runs deep, his writing is artful and he has a dead aim.

It seems appropriate to end this review by quoting briefly from a poem by Jude Nutter. Its title is "For Those Held Captive for Decades in Darkness", and it appears in *I Wish I Had a Heart Like Yours, Walt Whitman* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press,

2009). I think of Nutter as being another member of the aforementioned “small chorus of modern war poets”—poets who are, today, addressing their difficult subject matter from an enlightened, more fine-grained and personal perspective. This is especially evident in what she has given us in *I Wish I Had a Heart Like Yours, Walt Whitman*. Like Malone, Nutter gets past the big picture with her writing—past the geopolitical, the strategic, the tactical and their attendant information management, all of which compete now, more than ever, with war’s harder truths for our attention. Both poets narrow the focus, helpfully and instructively, and bring it back to bear upon the truly personal.

While we cannot, of course, disregard the big picture, neither should we permit it—as Malone so aptly expresses it—to “occlude” the oh-so-important “trench honesties”. “Trench honesties”, in all their wretchedness, litter the ground in *The Unreturning*. They are set loose in Malone’s poems so that they might elbow the glory, the speech-making, the chest-beating and the spin out of the way, like a tawdry curtain, and thereby permit us to see human combat’s harsh ravages unfiltered and on a truly human scale. In the end, some of the most important of war’s lessons can only be learned fully this way, that is, when its personalised horrors are witnessed virtually at “point blank” range.

We know that millions died horrible deaths during the Great War but, somehow, the zeroes in the statistics just don’t penetrate in the same way as does the personal. Nutter reminds us, in “For Those Held Captive for Decades in Darkness”, that each of those who fought and died “...was a man once—a tall column of flesh...” and that it behoves us to remember that each, too, had a name that “...must have fluttered all through childhood like a pennant about his mother’s lips...”. This is Malone’s message too.

*The Unreturning* deserves your attention. Indeed, this book and its ilk cry out for the attention of all of us.

*Bravo, Martin Malone.*