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**Meigs, Mark. *Optimism at Armageddon: Voices of American Participants in the First World War*. New York: New York University Press, 1997.**

One of the most pervasive myths of twentieth-century history concerns the story of the "disillusioned" European soldier of World War I. The argument that the uniformly idealistic young men of 1914 all slouched out of the trenches in 1918 full of disillusionment with, and even hatred for, the society and values dominant before the war began has been in vogue since the 1920s. In 1975 Paul Fussell restated this idea for the post-Vietnam generation of American and British historians in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, and a multitude of imitators continue to this day to use Fussell's interpretation as the model for their own research. This is so despite the fact that the romantic tale of idealism and disillusionment does not stand up to serious research into the diaries, letters, and memoirs of former soldiers, as some historians are only now beginning to realize. The persistence of what one might call "Victorian" values of morality and patriotism, not only among the "old men" who had not experienced the horrors of trench warfare, but also among veterans of the worst of the fighting on the western front, was indeed a hallmark of the 1920s and 1930s.

There has never been much dispute that the six months in which American soldiers served at the front in large numbers were not enough to put prewar American cultural attitudes to the test. Mark Meigs, in his ambitious attempt to sum up the American experience of the First World War, sensibly concludes that optimism, in the form of faith in American power and ideals, never wavered among the majority of soldiers. This commonplace argument is unfortunately the most profound statement of his book, which wanders aimlessly in a morass of weak references to "hot-button" issues like race and gender, frustratingly superficial comparisons between the Civil War and the First World War, and summaries of other historians' work on the soldiers' experience of the Great War. If one cuts out these repetitive and unoriginal sections, all that is left of the book is a couple of unexceptional, article-length discussions of American tourism in France and U.S. Army attitudes toward relations between American soldiers and French women.

Meigs touches upon, but never fully answers what to this reader's mind are the most interesting unanswered questions of American participation in the war. Why did volunteers join up? How did they endure the fighting, which in many instances was as awful as that endured by European soldiers? How did they remember their experiences in the war, and the war dead? A scholarly work that answers all of these questions from the American perspective has yet to be written, and would invite useful comparisons with the British, French and German experiences. Meigs, swallowing the "disillusionment" myth popular among many historians, states that it "cannot be stated too strongly" that "the experience of World War I differed for both America and Americans from the experience of the European combatant nations and combatants." Alas, Meigs' failure to adequately delineate the American experience of the war leaves this statement unsubstantiated. Hopefully we shall see before long a more serious attempt at a comparative history of the Great War that will avoid timeworn myths and literary-historical fashions in order to get to the truth of the matter.

*Ed Lengel*