

Two Storm Wood

Philip Gray

Books about World War I tend to concentrate on the fighting that occurred between 1914 and 1918. There is a tendency to feel that, once the Armistice was declared on November 11th 1918, the surviving soldiers climbed out of their trenches, shook hands and headed for home. This is far from true and the impressive part of Philip Gray's novel *Two Storm Wood* is that it is set in the months following, when labour battalions of volunteer soldiers and civilians, often drafted from other countries such as China, combed the battlefields for the dead who still lay there. The book is written in the third person and in a non-chronological way, jumping back and forth in time and place, creating and bringing together various threads in the story. It contains a relatively small cast of characters, all of whom are important to the plot. The significance of the first chapter is not evident until near the end of the book.

A feature of the book is its detailed descriptions of both wartime fighting and the immediately post-war battlefields, with the process of locating and recovering the bodies. All of this took place in almost incessant rain and the reader can imagine the unpleasantness of working and moving in deep mud.

Captain James Mackenzie is a soldier commanding a group of volunteers who has developed a near obsession with locating and identifying the fallen so that they may receive a proper burial. Amy Vanneck, along with her friend Kitty Price, have both lost loved ones but, instead of sitting at home waiting for news, decided to go out to the battlefields and brave the conditions to find out for themselves what happened to them. Amy had fallen in love with Edward Haslam, a music teacher who was not from the right class as far as her mother, Lady Constance, was concerned. After she had turned down his proposal of marriage, he had joined up and became a Captain in the 7th Manchesters.

The appearance of the two women astounds Mackenzie, but he gives what help he can while suggesting this was no place for a woman. Kitty finds that her loved one has a grave and returns home, but Amy continues her search, gaining help from the disfigured Provost Marshall Westbrook. She discovers that Edward may have been involved in a horrific event that took place in a German dugout named Two Storm Wood. She also discovered that he had

become expert in silent killing during trench raids; an ability encouraged by his admiration for his Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes, while his conscience was numbed by a growing addiction to cocaine. Later, he began to become disillusioned with Rhodes's acceptance of what he considered to be unacceptable methods. This was thrown into sharp relief by his discovery of the horrors in Two Storm Wood, an event that involved the brutal murder of members of a Chinese Labour Battalion.

The appalling conditions of World War I trench warfare created severe traumatic stress to many soldiers, in a few cases creating psychopathic killers like Sgt Farrer and Private Hughes. Rhodes had become traumatised and brutalised as a child many years earlier when he witnessed the murder of his parents in the Taiyuan Massacre. Edward Haslam still managed to hang on to his humanity but warfare and extreme violence have psychological effects, which are well portrayed. On the other hand, the group felt that the events near the end of the book were rather melodramatic, perhaps written with a view to a future film but, allowing for that, everyone felt that *Two Storm Wood* was an excellent well-written book.

December – *The Island* by Victoria Hislop

January – *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë

February – *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys