

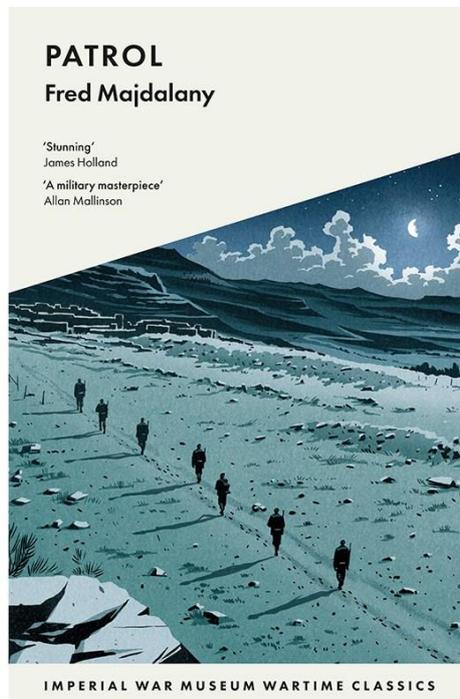
The In & Out Club Library

15 June 2020 ·



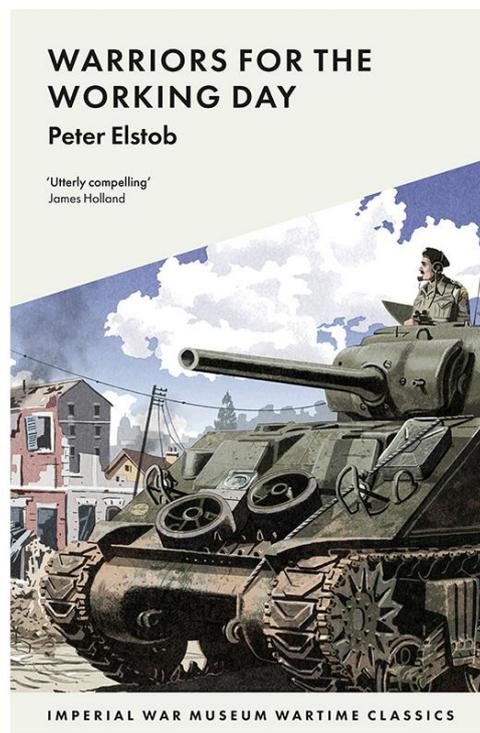
In the programme ‘Open Book’ on Radio Four on Sunday 14th June, Alex Clark discussed with William Boyd the re-issuing, 75 years after the end of the Second World War, of two novels written by soldiers who served in that war. They’re published by the Imperial War Museum in their Wartime Classics series, and both are semi-autobiographical novels dealing with frontline battles in Tunisia and Normandy: *Patrol* by Fred Majdalany, first published in the late 1950s, and *Warriors for the Working Day* by Peter Elstob, published in the early 1960s.

Alex Clark asked what rôle the revisiting of this kind of historical fiction plays in helping us to re-evaluate the past? and William Boyd (‘whose own novels, such as *Restless* and *Sweet Caress*, have explored multifarious stories from the period’) replied that it’s very important in the case of WWII, as ‘almost all the people who experienced it are no longer with us – the witnesses have almost all died out’, and if you want to know what it was really like, then ‘these novels are a wonderful gateway to understanding that’.



Alex Clark pointed out that these are books written by actual combatants, dealing with lesser known engagements in the War, such as the theatre in north Africa; and William Boyd responded that they are nevertheless very sophisticated novels, which distill the writers' experiences into works of art – that they stand up as extremely good novels, and are in fact very literary.

He was asked about the mixed heritage of Fred Majdalany – ‘something we’ve become increasingly interested in talking about’, in the context of those who took part in the War. William Boyd replied that yes, he ‘found it quite extraordinary to think of a Lebanese officer in the Lancashire Fusiliers; you’d think that it would have attracted a bit more notice’, but that it was ‘much more commonplace than we think; there were, for example, West Indian members of RAF bomber crews, but they’re not much talked about’.



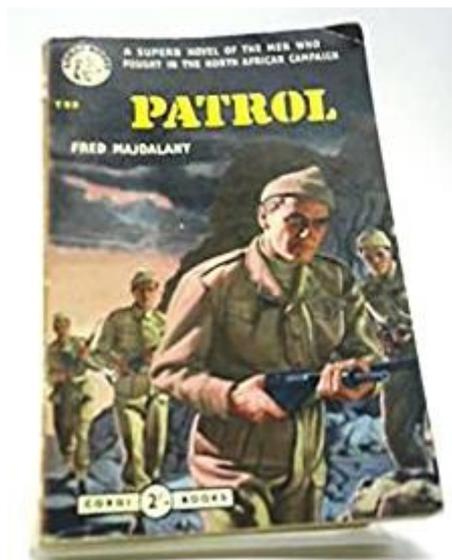
Alex Clark noted that both novels were very successful in their time - Peter Elstob's *Patrol* sold a quarter of a million copies – and yet now they're 'not exactly household names'; why are they only now being rediscovered? William Boyd replied that, when they were first published, the War had only been over by a decade or so; that nearly all the generation of men in their forties had been involved and had undergone extraordinary events, and that novels like these enshrined those collective experiences.

He was asked whether he felt as a child that something had held him back from asking his relatives in the generation above him about their experiences in the War; whether it would have felt in some way tactless to inquire; and he replied that this was very true – that he wished that he had sat his relatives down and asked them what they had done, because, now that they were dead and gone, it was very hard to piece together what their respective wars had been like.



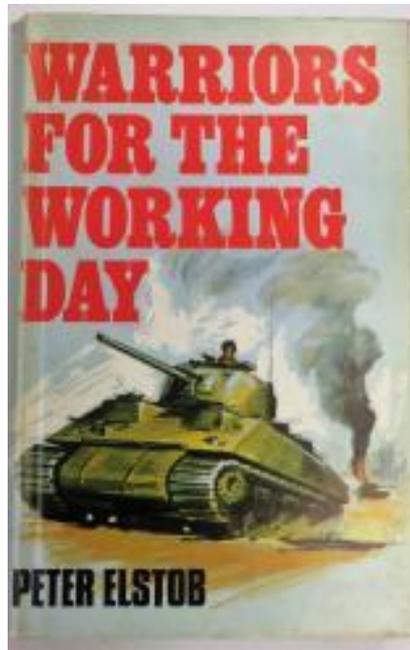
He mentioned his father-in-law, who had been captured at Tobruk, aged 19, and had been imprisoned in camps in Italy and then in Germany for the remainder of the War; he had then ‘cycled back through the Third Reich to meet the advancing Americans’. In his eighties he had been persuaded to write it all down, and luckily the Boyds therefore have his account. However, this was unusual, since his was a taciturn generation, and because it had been a whole World War they didn’t necessarily think that their own version of it would be worth preserving.

Alex Clark then remarked on William Boyd’s opinion that poetry was the supreme literary form of the First World War, and that, as if in riposte, in the Second World War the English novel had come of age: that it was the time of modernism, and the novel as a form ‘exploded’, so there was a new medium in which to tell stories. He replied that in the 1920s serious poetry had become obscure, difficult and modernist, and that the novel, in a way, took over as ‘the democratic means of expression’; he also noted that – although there were modernist novels (*Ulysses* was published in 1922) – the great broad tradition of the realistic novel had never gone away, so that when educated soldiers wanted to express themselves, ‘rather than write a difficult, tortured modernist poem’, they took to the novel. These rediscoveries demonstrate this, he continued, since not everybody writing such books was an officer: a lot of them were just enlisted men. He thought that people were also generally better educated in WWII, so that to think of writing a novel about one’s experiences was not something daunting or reserved for some intellectual elite.



He was asked about today’s war fiction, such as Kevin Powers’ *Yellow Bird*, about the Iraq War; did he think that Powers and similar writers were part of the same long tradition, or had changes in the fictional landscape guided them towards a new way of expressing their experiences? He

replied that he had read the latter, and that the author was a very interesting writer; however, he thought that today's novelists were indeed part of a long tradition, and that it was a very natural attempt to understand something that was utterly chaotic and arbitrary and randomly cruel - that filtering such extraordinary experiences through an art form allowed one to make sense of it, and that this was equally true of the novels coming out of Vietnam or Afghanistan or the Iraq war.



Fred Majdalany, *Patrol* [https://shop.iwm.org.uk/p/27585/Patrol-\(IWM-Wartime-Classic\)](https://shop.iwm.org.uk/p/27585/Patrol-(IWM-Wartime-Classic))

Peter Elstob, *Warriors for the Working Day* [https://shop.iwm.org.uk/.../Warriors-for-the-Working-Day-\(IWM...\)](https://shop.iwm.org.uk/.../Warriors-for-the-Working-Day-(IWM...))

Radio Four – Open Book: 14 June 2020 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m000k1cy>