

On Paul Fussell
Robert S. Griffin
www.robertsgriffin.com

Paul Fussell died on May 23rd, 2012 in an assisted living facility in Oregon. He was 88 years old. Fussell was an American cultural and literary historian and professor at Connecticut College, Rutgers University, and the University of Pennsylvania. His scholarship dealt with a wide range of topics, including eighteenth-century English literature and the American class system. He was best known to the general public for his writings on World Wars I and II, which underscored the gap between the romantic myths and grand justifications of wars and the terrifying and horrific realities confronted by the young men who fight them and are maimed and slaughtered in them. Fussell was a soldier in Europe near the end of World War II and badly injured in combat. His book *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford University Press, 2000) won the National Book Award, the National Critics Circle Award, and the Modern Library named it one of 100 best non-fiction books of the twentieth century.

I knew of Fussell and had seen him in Ken Burn's documentary series on World War II shown on PBS back in 2007, but I hadn't read anything he'd written. Reading his obituary in the *New York Times* put his name in the back of my mind, and a couple of days ago as I browsed the biographies section in the library I noticed a memoir he had written in 1996 entitled *Doing Battle: The Making of a Skeptic* (Little, Brown) and checked it out. I'm very glad I read the book, and a big part of this thought is to recommend it to you.

Fussell had a first-rate mind and he was a superb writer. *Doing Battle* recounts his life from his earliest years in California through his war experiences, his academic studies at Harvard, his two marriages, and his university career and writings and what compelled them. His detailed accounts of combat during the war are riveting; I won't forget them.

I think *Doing Battle* would be an especially good book for young people to read. It shows the actuality of war beneath the historical generalizations and rationalizations they get in school and the glamorized depictions they encounter in the media. It counterbalances the exhortations of politicians, whose stock in trade is selling the necessity and virtues of anonymous mass murder. It

offers to those just starting out in life an example of what one very talented person, someone who took life seriously and lived it self-consciously and honorably and productively, did with his time on this earth, which has very recently ended for all of eternity. Reading about what Fussell experienced and thought and how he conducted both the public and private dimensions of his life and why will prompt young readers to reflect on what's happened to them thus far in their lives and what effect it has had, and who they are and what they stand for and where they want to take things between now and when just getting through the day will be all they can manage--if we live long enough, no matter how vital and engaged with the world we have been, either literally or in effect we'll be in an assisted living facility. That is where it is going.

Three quotes from *Doing Battle* I picked up on:

Fussell said that his war experiences confirmed a number of attitudes that remained and intensified over the whole of his life:

One was the abandonment forever of the high school and college impulse to be "popular" by joining, or at least not offending, the herd. I now became a conspicuous non-joiner, and have never happily joined any group since. I became obsessed with the imagined obligation to go it alone, absolutely, and *teamwork* became for me a dirty word. I became irrationally angry at any attempt to coerce me into group behavior or to treat me as if all human beings are the same. I developed an indignant suspicion of quantitative ways of describing or measuring human talents and values. I was now convinced that my duty was criticism, meaning not carping but the perpetual obligation of evaluation. I deepened my new empirical understanding of the brevity of life and determined not to waste a second of it in contemptible or silly activity, like sports or gossip or trivia.

Elsewhere he referred to

. . . a revulsion, almost physical, at fraudulent language, especially patriotic clichés. Furious one day at some newspaper canting, I dashed off a letter to the editor protesting the facile and false formula "gave his life" to suggest the motives of soldiers, who were, after all, for the

most part highly unwilling to give their lives. I pointed out the similarity between soldiers and labor . . .

And he wrote:

There could hardly be a more effective antidote to the army than the world of moral subtlety delineated in Henry James's *The Ambassadors*. What better way to purge military crudities than to rise to James's concept of art, including his encouragement to total sensitivity, as in, "Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost." I found equally telling and useful Strether's Pateresque advice to little Bilham at Gloriani's garden party: "Live all you can; it's a mistake not to. It doesn't so much matter what you do in particular so long as you live your life . . . Live, Live!"

Do look into Paul Fussell's writing when you get the chance.