

# BOOK REVIEW

**Luise White. *Fighting and Writing: The Rhodesian Army at War and Postwar*.** Durham: Duke University Press, 2021. xiii + 279 pp. Photographs. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$28.95. Paper. ISBN: 9781478011729.

Before 1980, with the impending transition to majority rule in the works, Ian Smith's government systematically burned and destroyed thousands of documents. The Rhodesian state, in destroying its archives, attempted to erase its very existence from the annals of history. But the legacy of Rhodesia lives on beyond the archives, as Luise White demonstrates in *Fighting and Writing*, through the use of memoirs published by white soldiers of their experiences in the Rhodesian army to reconstruct a messy history of a messy war. Memory is fallible, however, and often reveals more about the storyteller than it does about the story being told. Luise White is no stranger to making sense of rumor and gossip as historical sources of evidence and information; her earlier work on speaking with vampires parsed the local meanings given by storytellers in unstable texts to the facets of their experiences they considered most important to understanding their lives and their worlds. In this narrative, the author uses the voices of white soldiers in an attempt to complicate the binaries that dominate studies of Zimbabwe—between Rhodesia and Zimbabwe, and between black and white—by placing the meaning of these categories in the “unstable chronology” of the transition from white minority rule to black majority rule through the eyes and voices of the soldiers fighting a war they knew they were never going to win (29). *Fighting and Writing* considers the history of counterinsurgency and the writings of former Rhodesian soldiers to argue that knowledge of the “bush,” as learned from Africans, is critical to the study of this war and of these men. By the end of this book, however, the reader learns more about the way the war is remembered than the actual war itself, particularly for those fighting from the other side.

Each individual chapter of the book focuses on a specific element of the war and how it was recounted as a way of piecing together the experiences of white soldiers. Chapters Three and Four home in on pseudo-operations as a form of counterinsurgency, and the idea that white soldiers could “become black” through the cooption of indigenous knowledge about nature and the

landscape, the mastering of which made up as much of the battle as did actually confronting guerrillas. But the specifics of that knowledge are missing here, given voice instead through white interpretation. Readers not familiar with Rhodesia may feel as lost in the “bush” as did the white soldiers; without maps to orient, the “bush” remains a vague and ambiguous trope of white writing, even as the focus of these chapters is how white soldiers relied on knowledge of the specifics of a terrain historically unfamiliar to them.

*Fighting and Writing* is thus more an exploration of the role of memory than it is about the actual war, drawing from analysis of war memoirs from other parts of the world for context. Chapters Five and Nine consider the history of the infamous Selous Scouts, and the politics of ghostwriting, collaboration, and the idea of copyrighting memory that contribute to the instability of how the war was both fought and remembered. In between, individual chapters focus on specific facets of war: guns, poison, and foreign soldiers—elements of a war recounted in messy, uneven ways as part of a messy, uneven war. Ultimately, White argues that these soldiers were fighting a battle they knew they were not meant to win, only persisting to keep the guerrillas at bay in the rural landscape in order to retain white advantage in negotiations taking place in far-away urban locales.

In the end, this book perhaps asks more questions than are answered through an interrogation of the meaning of how these elements of the war are remembered in the absence of archival documentation. White concludes that these memoirs, told in the form of individual remembrance as well as collective memory, suggest that counterinsurgency tactics were more successful as storytelling tropes than they were in actually winning an unwinnable war (223). The traditional binary of black and white, of majority versus minority rule, of Zimbabwe versus Rhodesia, is “at best a messy binary” based on the idea that “race turned out to be really complicated”; this is perhaps a response to the eviction of white farmers during fast-track land reform in the early 2000s as filtered through white vision and memory more than a new historical argument about race in southern Africa (224).

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