Peasants and Partisans, Stranger Selves: Stuart Hood’s Memoir Project and Second World War Life Writing

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Abstract
This essay is the first detailed critical analysis of *Pebbles from My Skull/Carlino* (1963/1985), Stuart Hood’s account of the 1943/4 period he spent fighting as part of the Italian Resistance. It situates Hood’s work in relation to the prevailing ‘Colditz Myth’ associated with British Second World War prisoner of war escapees and the conceptions of England and Europe underlying this myth. It also considers Hood’s ‘memoir project – the self-reflexive narrative of self he was compelled to tell, extending across multiple texts, and to which he was reluctant to give final form or finished meaning – in relation to recent theoretical work on life writing and military life writing in particular.

Keywords
Second World War, memoir, autobiography, prisoner of war, Italian resistance, Stuart Hood

This article is the first extended critical analysis of Stuart Hood’s *Pebbles from My Skull* (first published 1963), and the related life writing he produced thereafter. *Pebbles from My Skull* narrates Hood’s experiences as an escaped British prisoner of war (POW) who was sheltered by peasants and fought as part of the Italian...
resistance during the Second World War. I focus on Hood’s memoir project for several reasons. The first is that Hood’s multifaceted career as a soldier, writer, translator, television executive, radical socialist, academic and Scottish literary figure deserves to be more closely studied. The second is that Pebbles from My Skull does not conform to dominant understandings of how British Second World War military memoirs, especially POW memoirs, posit British identity in relation to continental Europe. The third is that Hood’s memoir project stands somewhat askance in relation to the general trends in twentieth-century military life writing identified by cultural historians such as Yuval Noah Harari and Samuel Hynes. Harari defines the fundamental truth claim posited by the modern military memoir in terms of experiential battleground ‘flesh-witnessing’ and the putatively revelatory insights arising from this.1 Samuel Hynes neatly summarises this type of truth claim as: ‘It is true because he [sic] was on the field; if you don’t know that, you don’t understand anything.’2 Hood’s memoir project, by contrast, essays a different kind of personal history of the conflict in which he was involved. It resonates with contemporary critical interest in life writing that is ‘self-reflexive about the problem of remembering’, alert to the discursive nature of recorded experience and attuned to the type of relationality Thomas Couser considers one of the main characteristics of memoir.3

**Colditz and Fontanellato**

Nicholas Cull has argued that in England the dominant public memory of the Second World War has become a ‘time capsule containing the key elements of older conceptions of Englishness’. The assumption of ‘English exceptionalism, that held that the island possessed something special and distinct from the rest of the world [including Europe]’ concatenates mythic events such as ‘resisting Spanish and French (Catholic) tyrants, freeing slaves in the nineteenth century and resisting the Kaiser in the twentieth’.4 It encompasses an ‘English style that emphasised the common man, eschewed professionalism, and relied on improvisation and “muddling through”’.5 For Cull, Second World War POW escape narratives encapsulate the myth of English exceptionalism. This myth still has considerable cultural purchase, whether it involves English football fans chanting the theme from the film version of The Great Escape (1963) whenever England plays Germany, or populist politicians searching for vivid metaphors for Brexit.6 As a Scot and Marxist internationalist, for whom an event celebrating the 100th anniversary of his birth and his multi-faceted career was held at the National Library of Scotland, but not at any equivalent British institution, it is unsurprising that Hood’s work falls outside this public memory of mythic, archaic English exceptionalism which informs some of the best known and most frequently discussed Second World War POW escape narratives.7

The most well-known British Second World War POW memoirs are those set in Germany, all of which encompass daring and ingenious escapes. Key texts include Eric Williams’ semi-autobiographical novel The Wooden Horse (1949), Paul
Brickhill’s *The Great Escape* (1950) (a memoir written by an Australian focusing on British and Commonwealth prisoners) and Pat Reid’s *The Colditz Story* (1952), which has spawned not only a film but also two television series, both titled *Colditz* (1972–4, 2005), several television documentaries, board games, action figures and other spin-off products. Hynes characterises these British POW memoirs as ‘adventure stories that inject the old personal military virtues—courage, daring, ingenuity, endurance—into the anonymous mass narrative of modern war’.

Hynes also argues that British POW memoirs differ from many other Second World War memoirs, which sometimes represent grotesque, astonishing, almost unimaginable landscapes and experiences, in that ‘there is no strangeness in them. The men who were sent to the camps seem quickly to have made themselves at home there... what they constructed... was English school life all over again.’ From this perspective, aspiring escapees become ingenious, disobedient, cheeky public school-boys; the guards and camp commandants are the prefects and teachers. Another implication of Hynes’ analysis is that these narratives also reassert relatively traditional, conventional definitions of officer class masculinity.

There was nothing inevitable about this. As Mark Rawlinson has argued, British writing about Second World War POW experiences, resistance movements and Special Operations Executive (SOE) agents did not have to be parochial. In these narratives, captured British military personnel or agents spent long periods of time in wartime Europe. These individuals’ relationships to continental Europe were different to those of conventional Allied forces, whose main contact with the enemy was in combat situations, or as their captors, and who typically encountered liberated civilians rather than those living under occupation. Yet this potential to move beyond cultural insularity was often held in check; Rawlinson argues that British POW literature frequently exhibited a countervailing tendency to conflate incommensurable institutions and experiences. He identifies a significant trend in this writing that takes the British public school as a major, limiting frame of reference: ‘By emphasising school in terms of its totalitarian structures, writers appropriated alien political experience at the same time as they constructed a parochial ideological framework for surveying the European scene.’ As Ken Worpole has argued, the POW officers’ prison camp/public school analogy, which is especially prominent in *The Colditz Story*, also fed into a wider process, from the early 1950s onwards, of the British cultural and political climate becoming more conservative. This process involved reconstructing the memory of the Second World War as having been fought to ‘preserve the old order’ rather than to ‘move forward to an alternative society’, which the election of the postwar Labour government (1945–51) had initially seemed to presage.

Memoirs published by British POWs, such as Hood, who escaped from Italian camps into Italy are relatively marginal in academic discussions and popular memory, compared to those such as *The Wooden Horse*, *The Great Escape* and *The Colditz Story*, set in German prison camps. Several notable memoirs written by British prisoners who escaped from the Italian Fontanellato orphanage (camp PG49) have been published – for example Dan Billany’s and David Dowie’s *The
Cage (1949), Eric Newby’s *Love and War in the Apennines* (1971) and Tony Davies’ *When the Moon Rises* (1973), as well as *Pebbles from My Skull* – but nothing similar to the Colditz myth, now familiar enough to have been analysed in a book length study by S.P. Mackenzie, has arisen as a result.¹⁴

On one level, the reason for this disparity is self-evident; Germany was Britain’s major European adversary during the Second World War. However, some excellent British POW writing set in Germany, and even partly in Colditz, such as Michael Burn’s semi-autobiographical novel *Yes Farewell* (1946), is far less well known than Reid’s memoir. Other factors therefore play into the disparity. One of these is captured by Michael Paris’ argument that British representations of war as popular entertainment have,

> in large part, [been] made possible because after 1745 the nation’s battles were fought on foreign fields… The civilian population of Britain was thus spared the horrors visited upon [other European civilians] and could distance itself from the reality of battle and enjoy the vicarious excitements of war.¹⁵

Memos such as *The Colditz Story* and *The Great Escape*, with their officers staging inventive, suspenseful, exciting prison breaks, could more easily be assimilated to what Paris, following Graham Dawson, calls the British ‘pleasure culture of war’. Memoirs written by British POWs who escaped into the uncertain, sometimes brutal open ground of post-Armistice Italy and the Resistance struggle were less easy to incorporate into dominant frameworks for understanding and enjoying British war narratives generally, and Second World War POW stories set in Europe in particular.

The September 1943 Italian Armistice resulted in the Italian War Ministry instructing camp commandants to withdraw their guards. Several thousand British POWs simply walked out of the camps that previously held them, disregarding the misguided order from MI9 within the British War Office that POWs should await Allied liberation. Those who stayed were relocated by German forces to camps in Germany and Poland. Those who left found themselves in an unprecedented situation, where the newly constituted Italian Social Republic (RSI), and German forces, sought to reassert fascist authority over northern and central Italy, against the challenge of Allied invasion in the south and partisan resistance throughout the country. Many Italian civilians afforded British escapees assistance during this period, taking considerable risks in the process. Escaped British POWs’ memoirs recounting experiences within this context could not easily resort to public school analogies, nor could they convincingly invoke English exceptionalism in situations where escapees were so thoroughly dependent upon Italian peasants and partisans.

Rather than impose a parochial British cultural framework onto strange landscapes and ‘alien political experiences’, memoirs published by POWs who escaped from Italian camps could potentially engage in meaningful ways with the continental European experiences that Paris argues are largely absent from British war
culture. Gordon Lett’s *Rossano* (1955), for example, contains a succinct example, where he contrasts listening to the radio when serving with British forces in North Africa with the same activity when fighting alongside Italian partisans. His comparison demonstrates the type of perspectival shift that could be accomplished:

How many times . . . had I heard [radio] commentators describe clandestine gatherings of the oppressed people of Europe behind closed doors. Then I had thought the reports exaggerated, now they seemed insipid in comparison with what was happening nightly in the village of Torpiana.\(^{16}\)

*Rossano* is the work of a Cold Warrior whose antipathy to international Communism entails solidarities and antagonisms that cut across national borders. Italian Communists are represented as trouble-makers, and Communist political advisers attached to partisan formations are represented as lacking the requisite military masculinity. For example, Lett caustically comments, after a major offensive, ‘many of the sleeping partners in the Resistance Movement – notably the “Political Commissars” – had fled far afield when the enemy attacked; one of them had broken all records and arrived at the Swiss frontier.’\(^{17}\) *Pebbles from My Skull*, written by a Scottish Marxist intellectual, is a different proposition. It articulates a sophisticated form of transnational leftist solidarity, without succumbing to Communist mythology, that does not deny differences between and within those it encompasses.

**Hood’s Memoir Project**

*Pebbles from My Skull* covers a period of nearly twelve months during 1943/4. It recounts Hood’s escape from Fontanellato, the support he received from Tuscan peasants, his involvement with the partisan struggle, the acquisition of his *nom de guerre*, ‘Carlino’, the dilemma of dealing with possible collaborators, confrontations with enemy forces, Italian and German, and his eventual return to regular Allied forces. *Pebbles from My Skull* conforms to several aspects of Thomas Couser’s definition of memoir. One is a relatively narrow but deep focus on a particular issue or delimited period of time. Couser also defines memoir as a form of life writing where relationality is often important. Harari points out that celebration of the joys of comradeship is a typical feature of post-Romantic military memoirs; *Pebbles from My Skull*’s relationality is however more multifaceted than this. It is open to a range of others, including enemies. Couser also argues that one of the features of the expansive field of memoirs, unlike more formal biographies or autobiographies, is that they are typically ‘based on memory rather than research’.\(^{18}\) *Pebbles from My Skull* is based upon memory, but also questions its reliability, and as Hood’s project develops, places it in dialogue with other kinds of truth claim. This open-ended aspect of Hood’s work aligns it with Alex Zwerdling’s narrower definition of memoir, in contradistinction to ‘formal autobiography’, as a more ‘flexible form without a predictable terminus’.\(^{19}\) Hood’s
ongoing practice of life writing conforms to Zwerdling’s definition of a ‘memoir project’, ‘an autobiographical narrative that might take the form of a book, or a pair of books, or a set of interrelated essays or “sketches”’. A memoir project may exceed the boundaries of a single book because it involves ‘permanently unfinished business . . . for writers with a tale they urgently need to tell and a reluctance to give it final shape’. It is important, however, to emphasise that I use the term ‘memoir project’ as a theoretical concept, and not as a term Hood employed. As I explore in more detail later in this essay, the terms ‘memoir’ and ‘autobiography’ carry a range of different connotations within different contexts within wider public discourse.

Hood’s memoir project, spanning the early 1960s to the early 2000s, began with *Pebbles from My Skull* and continued, in a subsequent edition, retitled *Carlino* (1985) with a new afterword, and in later essays about this part of his life. The 1985 afterword and later essays conform to Jacques Derrida’s characterisation of postfaces: ‘while pretending to turn around and look backward, one is also in fact starting over again, adding an extra text, complicating the scene.’ Moreover, Hood was also a novelist, and one can fruitfully trace resonances between some of his novels and life writing. The most direct link is to certain aspects of Hood’s novel *A Den of Foxes* (1991), set in both the late 1980s and the near future. Peter Sinclair, the male protagonist in *A Den of Foxes* is partly modelled on Hood. Sinclair participates in a science-fiction wargame, initially by correspondence from his retreat in Scotland and later with other players in Tuscany, the site of Sinclair’s and Hood’s most intense wartime experiences. Within the wargame, Sinclair’s memoir, written by an author who ‘had taken part in a war to defeat Fascism’, thereby echoing *Pebbles from My Skull/Carlino*, literally survives into a late twenty-first century dystopian future. The memoir’s radical socialist humanism becomes, for the future authoritarian elite, a testament to the false and dangerous delusions of the past. For Catriona, the rebellious heroine of *A Den of Foxes*’ science-fiction/wargame strand, the memoir is on the other hand an opening onto an alternative conception of the world.

One fundamental reason why Hood frequently returned to his wartime Italian experiences is because he was open to new and revised understandings of the events in which he was involved. He does not validate ‘flesh-witnessing’ as the ultimate guarantor of personal or historical truth. However, there were limits to this relativism. Another reason why Hood extended his memoir project was to challenge some emergent new interpretations of the struggle in which he was involved. This was vital for a politically engaged writer personally implicated in events whose significance was not widely recognised in Britain and whose meaning was subject to fierce contestation within Italy. For example, Hood wrote in his 2000 essay, ‘Memoirs of the Italian Resistance’:

Why is so little known in Britain about . . . the courage of [Resistance] fighters and their great successes in liberating so much of north Italy . . . The answer lies in an official silence in which a colonial cast of mind combines with reluctance to recognise
the achievement of the Italian left... At present in Italy things are being said and written about the Resistance which were not said ten or 20 years ago. It is undoubtedly true that after this passage of time it is necessary and possible to look at the Resistance and admit to its mistakes as well as to its military and political successes. The memory of the Resistance can no longer be used to silence criticism. But what must be fought is the revisionist line which equates Resistance fighters and Fascists, saying that there was nothing to give between them, and that the Fascists had a case. This is the voice of the conservative right wing tendency in Italy and elsewhere that seeks to rewrite history.26

**Memory and Knowledge**

British memoirs and biographies of the 1950s and 1960s relating to the Second World War were in fact more diverse than cultural historians sometimes acknowledge. This is partly because so many were published during this period; the sheer volume of publications allowed some scope for variety, whereas academic discussion has tended to focus only upon a narrow selection. *Pebbles from My Skull* bears some resemblance, in terms of epistemological standpoint, to two other, also less frequently cited memoirs, about SOE agents killed during the war: Jean Overton Fuller’s *Madeleine* (1952), about Noor Inayat Khan, and Elizabeth Nicholas’s *Death be Not Proud* (1958), about Diana Rowden. Victoria Stewart argues that rather than ‘smoothing over narrative gaps in such a way as to render them almost invisible to the reader... Fuller and Nicholas insert themselves as researchers into their narratives, describing the problems they encounter in the course of their investigations.’27 Hood works on his own memories in a similar fashion. For example, *Pebbles from My Skull* includes some vivid descriptions of rural environments, but these are intermittently framed in terms of a tension between physical geography and personal topography. This is exemplified in the italicised final paragraph of *Pebbles from My Skull’s* fourth chapter. Hood locates himself in the present of writing and comments on a landscape he has just described:

Looking for the cottage twenty years later, I failed to find it. The whole picture of the mountain pass, as I have it in mind, is at variance with facts of geography. I remember a long valley on our right; it is on the left. The pass over the col is longer than I remember it. The inn is not where I thought it to be. My topography is more real.28

In an interview to accompany *Carlino’s* publication, Hood affirmed memory’s lack of ‘transparency’ and went on to explain that ‘the whole question of knowledge’ motivated the addition of an afterword to the new and retitled edition of his memoir.29 In *Carlino’s* afterword, Hood accepted that the truth of his experiences was not a settled matter, and that as time had passed, ‘I have had to consider new perspectives.’30 One of these was a sociological theory, which he partly accepts, that explains the assistance provided to former POWs in terms of their value to Italians within a situation framed by the prospect of Allied victory. Hood explained: ‘the sociologists pointed out to me
that as a prisoner of war, I was also a kind of totem, with a value beyond the immediately practical...I was not [initially] aware of that.31 Another new perspective, justifying the change of title, was that his role in the Italian resistance had become mythologised, in the areas where he fought alongside the Italian partisans, to the extent that by the time of a 1981 visit ‘there were two schools of thought in the community: those who maintain that “Carlino” was a legend and the others who insisted they had known him, that he had indeed existed.’32

Hood also situates his memoir, in Carlino’s afterword, in more explicitly political terms than he considered possible on its first publication in 1963. He confirms that he was a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain before the war, and that his reasons for joining the Italian partisans ‘were therefore quite specific and specifically political’.33 Hood relates the lack of explicitness, the ‘political vacuum’ in Pebbles from My Skull, to his role in the early 1960s as the Controller of the BBC Television Service.34 Someone in this position could not publicly admit to such affiliations. This forms an ironic counterpoint to Gordon Lett’s author’s note about his anti-Communist partisans at the beginning of Rossano: ‘In this story the names of many of the partisans are those by which they were known in the mountains. This is rendered necessary by the fact that, for them, the political war continues.’35 Lett projects repressive political pressure and the need for self-censorship onto a foreign polity; for Hood these factors also operate within the British context. However, this is not a simple reversal of terms; Hood conceptualises politics in a less Manichean manner than Lett. Although he outs himself as a man of the Left in Carlino’s afterword, Hood also resists the mythologising by the Italian Communist Party (PCI) of the anti-fascist resistance, and of himself as the legendary Carlino, which he encounters on return trips to the region in which he fought.36 The new title Hood gives to his memoir’s 1985 edition indicates that this mythologisation has become a significant political issue since its first edition. It also brings to the fore the issues of memory, knowledge and identity; the fact that he is Carlino, not Stuart Hood, as far as the memories of some Italians are concerned.

**Contested Language: Self as Stranger/Stranger as Self**

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue that ‘autobiographical narrators come to consciousness of who they are, of what identifications and differences they are assigned or what identities they might adopt, through the discourses that surround them.’37 Hood’s memoir project implicitly accepts this argument. It is attuned to contests over definition and meaning within language; it also imaginatively engages with different positions within such contests, even positions opposed to Hood’s own. In Pebbles from My Skull, he reflects upon reading an obituary notice in a newspaper describing partisans as ‘bandits’:

> The word caught me between contempt and anger. I thought it over...and saw that, to the forces of authority the tactics of the resistance must always seem both cowardly
and cruel...To come into the open and fight things out cleanly would be to invite destruction.38

In his academic book On Television (1980), Hood makes a related point regarding the language of television news broadcasts. He argues: ‘Words reflect the realities of political relationships and political power.’39

The word ‘strangers’ is central to the science-fiction/wargame strand of A Den of Foxes. In the 2080s, on a planet colonised by an elite group who have escaped environmental and social devastation on earth, the ruling order is authoritarian and conservatively religious. Catriona, the heroine, uses the word ‘strangers’ when the state-sanctioned term for the unknown group from earth who have just landed on the planet, who she is sent to reconnoitre, is ‘intruders’. Catriona’s interrogator, during her debriefing after her reconnaissance mission, presses her on the use of ‘strangers’ and expounds on how ‘to deliberately defy a code constructed by a society could be dangerous: it was liable to make people feel insecure, as if their grip on reality and in particular on social reality had been loosened.’40 The interrogator also warns her against the phrase ‘brothers and sisters’ used by the unknown group of strangers/intruders, identifying it as ‘the language of a faith long discredited...the faith in us – in humankind – as a brotherhood or sisterhood who might somehow live together in harmony and well-being.’41 At the end of the novel, Catriona openly challenges the dominant linguistic code by calling the unknown group ‘brothers and sisters’ as she crosses over to join them.

These considerations relate directly to Hood’s memoir project. Rather than opposing self and other, he increasingly recognises himself as a series of strangers. The epilogue in Pebbles from My Skull oscillates on the question of where Hood’s identity is located. He refers to his wartime experiences in Italy as a moment when ‘outward circumstances’ perhaps exactly corresponded to the ‘inner structure of [his] being’. Yet he also describes this period as an interregnum, a ‘fugue within a fugue’, an escape from ‘the reality of war...which is itself an escape from reality’, after which he resumes a more settled identity.42 In Carlino’s afterword Hood describes his reaction to being told by another former POW, years later, about an incident when they coolly walked along a road next to a group of German soldiers: ‘It is as if I were hearing a report about some stranger.’43 ‘Stranger’ is a word that links memory and identity for Hood. A year after Carlino appeared, Hood published a brief essay in which he reflected, in the third person, on three photographs of himself from the 1940s: ‘Essentially the three faces, in which he recognises a continuing likeness, and can also trace a certain likeness to his face today, are those of persons he does not know.’44 Smith and Watson draw upon Stuart Hall’s notion of identity as ‘always in process’ to argue that ‘the stuff of autobiographical storytelling, then, is drawn from multiple, disparate, and discontinuous experiences and the multiple identities constructed from and constituting those experiences...Sometimes narrators are aware of the conflicts and contradictions, sometimes not.’45 Hood’s autobiographical narrator displays this awareness.
A corollary to recognising oneself as a stranger is openness to different positions and perspectives, beyond the boundaries of personal and national identity. In *Pebbles from My Skull* this openness ranges from Hood reflecting on why fascists would call partisans ‘bandits’, to conversing with a German priest about theology, guilt and sin, despite his own atheism, to engaging with Soviet Red Army officers who are technically collaborators, having worked for the Nazis in the Todt organisation, but who later fought as partisans. Hood chooses to bunk with them in a holding camp in Naples, rather than the British officers who in the ‘communal world of the dormitory’ are ‘at home, organised, snug. In their public schools they had been trained for just such a life... But here there were aliens to break the easy routine.’

Most significantly, in a memoir in which Hood lays bare his misgivings and troubled conscience regarding the men he and his partisan group killed, he recounts without disagreement or commentary the blunt opinion of an Italian peasant, at the spot where three young Germans Hood’s comrades killed are buried: ‘“Poor things”, I said, using the Italian formula, “They too were sons of mothers”. “What do you mean ‘poor things’”, he said. “We didn’t kill enough of them”.

Elaine Scarry has argued that the centrality of injuring in war is frequently rendered invisible, in various forms of writing, through either omission or re-description. In contrast to this, Hood in his memoir project returns insistently to the pain and injury sustained by the men he and his partisan group kill. James Boyd White, in his book on the language of the ‘empire of force’, cites a passage from *Pebbles from My Skull* as his first example of a text that resists the pervasive logic he summarises as: ‘one can engage in war only by denying the full humanity of those one is trying to kill’. This characteristic of *Pebbles from My Skull* is evident in *A Den of Foxes* as well. Hood’s acknowledgement of the pain of others, regardless of whether they are categorised as enemy and a legitimate target, forms part of the ‘self as stranger/stranger as self’ dialectic that plays out across his memoir project.

In 2002, nearly sixty years after the events covered in *Pebbles from My Skull*, Hood wrote a brief letter to the *London Review of Books*, in response to a review of a book on the ethics of killing. Recalling an incident when he ordered the killing of a possible fascist infiltrator, he said, ‘I am still worried by the “case”, which seems to me more difficult to deal with’ than an imaginary scenario in the ethics book. Hood’s memoir project, his compulsive returns to the material in *Pebbles from My Skull*, can be understood in relation to critical work on life writing, war and trauma theory. For example, it resonates with Victoria Stewart’s discussion of the ‘infinitely expandable nature of [Vera] Brittain’s autobiography’, motivated by a different kind of war trauma, in which ‘repetition occurs principally in the re-writing of events in different formats and contexts, in an attempt to gain mastery of them’. As Linda Anderson argues, this ongoing return, from new perspectives, to the same events, or to similar scenarios in Brittain’s fiction, produces ‘an “otherness” in terms of her self’. Hood arrives at a perception of himself as a stranger through an analogous process.
Autobiography, War Memoir, Gender and Authorship

I have referred throughout to Hood’s memoir project, but he would not have used the first of these words. In one interview he said: ‘My writing is autobiographical. I’ve never been tempted to write a memoir of my life in broadcasting. The ones I’ve read are…mostly anecdotal, and, in most cases, unreflective.’54 This is consistent with the most famous quotation from Pebbles from My Skull, the last words in the main body of the text, prominently cited in Ken Worpole’s influential discussion of British literature of the Second World War:

We may record the past for various reasons: because we find it more interesting; because by setting it down we can deal with it more easily; because we wish to escape from the prison where we face our individual problems, wrestle with our particular temptations, triumph in solitude and in solitude accept defeat and death. Autobiography is an attempted jail-break. The reader tunnels through the same dark.55

The quotation enshrined as epitomising Hood’s project employs the term autobiography, not memoir.

This replicates the value distinction, which many theorists of life writing now resist, that previously elevated autobiography above memoir. However, authors’ definitions are not necessarily the ones through which books reach their reading publics. Initially published by Hutchinson in 1963, in hardback, Pebbles from My Skull was reissued later the same year as November’s monthly choice, sent to all subscribers, by the Reader’s Union book club. An advertisement for Reader’s Union’s offerings for the latter part of 1963 described this widely circulated edition of Pebbles from My Skull as ‘a brilliant and most unusual memoir of the war’ (emphasis added).56 This usage of the term memoir conforms to what Julie Rak describes as its ‘customary association…with mass markets’.57 Hood’s memoir project cannot therefore be straightforwardly assimilated to either side of the autobiography/memoir distinction. This is demonstrated by the publishing history of Pebbles From My Skull, which encompasses an American edition published in the same year as the first British one by E.P. Dutton, a 1973 paperback issued by the new socialist publisher Quartet Books, the 1985 Carcanet paperback retitled Carlino, and confirmation of its status as a kind of classic with the publication of the latest, 2013 digital Faber Finds edition. This reverts to the initial title Pebbles from My Skull, but retains the additional material constituting Carlino as well as including a new introduction by Svetlana Hood and a chronology of Hood’s career.

Alex Vernon has underscored the diversity of different forms of military life writing and the hybridity of many individual examples.58 Rather than pigeonholing particular instances of military life writing within fixed categories, Vernon suggests, from a theoretical perspective, that pursuing the issues of autonomy and relationality associated with autobiography and memoir, respectively, and
the gendered implications of these terms, may be more productive. Developing Laura Marcus’ insight into ‘the extent to which the autobiography/memoirs distinction is bound up with issues of power and powerlessness’,\textsuperscript{59} which are in turn linked to gender, Vernon argues:

In other words, autobiographers write their lives, they compose, they assert, they control; historically, they have been, for the most part, men. Memoirists, on the other hand, merely record, serving in effect as vessels of transmission; and historically, these vessels have been, for the most part, women—or rather, women and soldiers.\textsuperscript{60}

Vernon makes this connection between (non-military) women and soldiers because the circumstances of war, the impact those circumstances have upon the life writer and those around him or her, and the enforced dependence in war upon one’s comrades, are rarely of the individual’s choosing. Of course, there are ways of seeking to assert autonomy, control and, in Vernon’s terms, autobiographical self-definition within military life writing. Although British Second World War POW memoirs, and the films based upon them, are more diverse and complex than is often assumed,\textsuperscript{61} Ken Worpole makes an important point when he argues that they have been predominantly understood in relation to ‘a notion of ‘freedom’ that is totally abstract and talismanic’, which plays into ‘the vocabulary of conservatism as a rallying call against collectivist, communitarian and many other kinds of mutual association’.\textsuperscript{62} Eric Williams, author of \textit{The Wooden Horse}, offers a classic, emphatically gendered, statement of this position in his 1958 introduction to the collection \textit{Great Escape Stories}:

What is it that inspires weak and sometimes wounded men [to escape]? . . . The answer lies, I think, in their independence of spirit. They had been caught: that was bad enough. They were going to do something about it themselves and not wait around to be liberated. And they objected to being kicked around. Escaping is essentially a lonely business and an escapee must be able to dispense with companionship.\textsuperscript{63}

Hood’s memoir project cannot be easily assimilated to the abstract yet gendered notions of freedom, autonomy and agency Worpole identifies in British Second World War POW memoirs, which Williams asserts so stridently. The overarching metaphor in \textit{Pebbles from My Skull}, which informs its title, is an aqueous one that also runs through Vernon’s description of memoirists as vessels of transmission. Hood writes in \textit{Pebbles from My Skull}’s prologue:

Life washes through us like a tide. In its ebb and flow the fragments of the past are ground smooth so that, with time, we can handle them like stones from a rock pool, admiring their colour, shape and texture. We do not know which of them will stir and rattle as the tide ebbs from us for the last time. These are pebbles from my skull.\textsuperscript{64}
Hood returns to this imagery towards the end of the epilogue: ‘The currents of my life flowed together and swept me along. I wish their stream might have been more productive of human good, less costly in lives’.65 Hood’s use of reactive, aqueous imagery contrasts illuminatingly not only with Williams’ conventionally assertive posture, but also with its predominant uses in German Freikorps literature, to which Hood was indirectly linked through his reading and translation of Ernst Jünger’s work: another demonstration of his imaginative engagement with positions very different to his own.66 As Klaus Theweleit has argued, Freikorps literature, including some of Jünger’s early writing, abounds with flood, storm and liquid metaphors that threaten to dissolve identity and are therefore deeply ‘threatening, but also attractive’.67

For Hood, this type of imagery has a more epistemological valence, while also carrying an affective charge. It speaks of the vagaries of memory, of the changing arrangements of the past, of trauma that makes some stones hard to handle and which can become an overwhelming current. It cleaves to a conception of identity which traverses boundaries between self and stranger, British and Italian, and which is as much part of the flow of history as it is an autonomous act of self-definition. It aligns Hood’s memoir project, in Marcus’ and Vernon’s terms, with the fundamentally relational and ‘feminised’ side of the theoretical autobiography/memoir distinction. It is also a salutary reminder of the need to be wary of casual assumptions about ‘innate’ differences between men’s and women’s life writing arising solely from gender distinctions.68 Hood’s cultural location as an insider/outside, a Marxist, multilingual, lower middle class Scot, working within eminent British institutions, the army and the BBC, is as important as gender in providing an explanation for the orientation of his memoir project. At another level, however, more conventional gender distinctions come into play. We need to take seriously Hood’s categorical claim that his writing is autobiography rather than memoir. Above and beyond the specific thematic and stylistic dimensions of his memoir project, this can be seen as Hood’s masculinist assertion of an autonomous, ‘literary’ identity, in which he seeks affiliation with canonical authors such as Jünger rather than popular genre writers such as Eric Williams.69

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Notes

1. Y. N. Harari, *The Ultimate Experience: Battlefield Revelations and the Making of Modern War Culture*, 1450–2000 (Basingstoke, 2008).
2. S. Hynes, *The Soldiers’ Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (New York, 1997), p. 1.
3. S. Smith and J. Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (second edition) (Minnesota, 2010), 30; G. T. Couser, *Memoir: An Introduction* (Oxford, 2011), p. 21.
4. N. Cull, “‘Great Escapes’: “Englishness” and the Prisoner of War Genre’, *Film History*, 14:3/4 (2002), 282–95, 282.
5. Ibid., pp. 282–3.
6. For an example of the latter, see Anon., ‘Brexit: Boris Johnson Warns Against “Punishment Beatings”’. BBC, 18 January 2017. Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-38658998 (accessed 9 February 2017).
7. Details of the event at the National Library of Scotland on 4 September 2015 can be found at ‘Stuart Hood: Scottish Polymath’. Available at: https://asls.arts.gla.ac.uk/Stuart_Hood.html (accessed 27 August 2019).
8. Hynes, *The Soldiers’ Tale*, p. 236.
9. Ibid., p. 238.
10. For further discussion of the issue of gender and POW narratives, see J. Pattinson, L. Noakes and W. Ugolini, ‘Incarcerated Masculinities: Male POWs and the Second World War’, *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, 7:3 (2014), pp. 179–90, and several other essays in this issue of the journal.
11. M. Rawlinson, *British Writing of the Second World War* (Oxford, 2000), p. 187.
12. K. Worpole, *Dockers and Detectives* (London, 1983), p. 72.
13. I agree with Hynes, *The Soldiers’ Tale*, p. 242, that British POW memoirs detailing life in Japanese camps require separate treatment. He describes them as ‘diametrically opposite…sufferers’ stories’.
14. S. P. Mackenzie, *The Colditz Myth: British and Commonwealth Prisoners of War in Nazi Germany* (Oxford, 2004).
15. M. Paris, *Warrior Nation: Images of War in British Popular Culture, 1850–2000* (London, 2000), p. 25.
16. G. Lett, *Rossano* (London, 1955), p. 44.
17. Ibid., p. 111.
18. Couser, *Memoir*, p. 19.
19. A. Zwerdling, *The Rise of the Memoir* (Oxford, 2016), p. 5.
20. Ibid., p. 3.
21. Ibid., p. 7.
22. Carlino’s main difference from *Pebbles from My Skull* is the new afterword. The main body of the text is substantially unchanged.
23. J. Derrida, *Dissemination* (Chicago, 1981), p. 27.
24. S. Hood, *Carlino* (Manchester, 1985), p. 172. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition, which comprises the original text of *Pebbles from My Skull* and an afterword.
25. P. Cooke, *The Legacy of the Italian Resistance* (Basingstoke, 2011).
26. S. Hood, ‘Memoirs of the Italian Resistance’, *International Socialism*, 89 (2000). Available at: https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/isj2/2000/isj2-089/hood.htm (accessed 4 March 2017).
27. V. Stewart, ‘Representing Nazi Crimes in Post-Second World War Life Writing’, *Textual Practice*, 29:7 (2015), 1311–30, 1313.

28. Hood, *Carlino*, p. 37.

29. R. Coward, ‘In Conversation with Stuart Hood’, *PN Review*, 60 (1988), 27–31, 29.

30. Hood, *Carlino*, p. 135.

31. R. Coward, ‘In Conversation with Stuart Hood’, p. 30. The sociological theory to which Hood refers is expounded in R. Absalom, *A Strange Alliance: Aspects of Escape and Survival in Italy 1943–45* (Florence, 1991).

32. Hood, *Carlino*, p. 137.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

35. Lett, *Rossano*, n.p.

36. S. Hood, ‘Partisan Memories’, *History Today*, 58:8 (2001), 9–15, explores this in more detail.

37. Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, p. 34.

38. Hood, *Carlino*, pp. 65–6. Lett, *Rossano*, p. 40, reflects on how the term ‘bandits’ was replaced by ‘rebels’ in Axis radio and press reports when resistance attacks became more effective.

39. S. Hood, *On Television* (London, 1980), p. 10.

40. S. Hood, *A Den of Foxes* (London, 1991), p. 166.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 168.

42. Hood, *Carlino*, p. 131.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 135.

44. S. Hood, ‘War Photographs and Masculinity’, in P. Holland, J. Spence and S. Watney (eds), *Photography/Politics Two* (London, 1986), pp. 90–2, p. 91.

45. Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, p. 40.

46. Hood, *Carlino*, p. 127.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

48. E. Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford, 1985).

49. J. B. White, *Living Speech: Resisting the Empire of Force* (Princeton, 2006), p. 2.

50. I have deliberately avoided quoting any specific examples describing suffering and death from either *Pebbles from My Skull* or *A Den of Foxes*. As a former combatant deeply impacted by his wartime experiences, Hood sought to work through, with integrity and respect for those who suffered, the traumatic and ethical consequences of killing others in his non-fiction and semi-fictional writing. It is not essential to directly quote his descriptions in the context of this article.

51. S. Hood, Letter. *London Review of Books*, 24:17, 5 September 2002.

52. V. Stewart, *Women’s Autobiography: War and Trauma* (Basingstoke, 2003), p. 32.

53. L. Anderson, *Women and Autobiography* (New York, 1990), p. 100.

54. R. Lumley, ‘Keeping Faith: An Interview with Stuart Hood’ *Edinburgh Review*, 78–9 (1988), 172–206, 204.

55. Hood, *Carlino*, p. 133; cited in Worpole, *Dockers and Detectives*, p. 52; see also K. Worpole, ‘A Ghostly Pavement: The Political Implications of Local Working-Class History’, in R. Samuel (ed.), *People’s History and Socialist Theory* (London, 1981), pp. 22–32, p. 32.

56. Anon, ‘Why Reader’s Union is Still Best Value in the World of Books’ [advertisement], *Guardian*, 29 November 1963, p. 17.
57. J. Rak, ‘Are Memoirs Autobiography? A Consideration of Genre and Public Identity’, *Genre*, 37:3–4 (2004), 305–26, 323.
58. A. Vernon (ed.), *Arms and the Self: War, the Military and Autobiographical Writing* (Kent, Ohio, 2005).
59. L. Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses* (Manchester, 1994), p. 151.
60. A. Vernon, *Soldiers Once and Still* (Iowa, 2004), p. 206.
61. See M. Stollery, ‘“The Hideous Difficulty of Recreating Nazism at War”: Escaping from Europe in *The Wooden Horse* (1950) and the British Prisoner of War Film’, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 37:3 (2017), pp. 539–58.
62. Worpole, *Dockers and Detectives*, p. 54.
63. E. Williams (ed.), *Great Escape Stories* (London, 1958), p. 12.
64. Hood, *Carlino*, p. 7.
65. Ibid., p. 133.
66. Hood translated Jünger’s *On the Marble Cliffs* (1939) in 1947, *The Peace* (1945) in 1948 and *African Diversions* (1936) in 1954.
67. K. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies, Volume One: Women, Floods, Bodies, History* (Minneapolis, 1987), p. 230. The aqueous imagery is modulated, as Elliot Neaman points out, in Jünger’s Second World War journals, which Hood admired, to the recurring image of a shipwreck as a ‘metaphor for the situation in which [Jünger] finds himself’. See E. Neaman, foreword to Ernst Jünger, *A German Officer in Occupied Paris: The War Journals 1941–1945* (New York, 2019), p. 34. S. Howald, ‘Hood: Pebbles from his Skull’, 2002, Available at: http://www.stefanhowald.ch/pdf/en/E_Hood_Portrait.pdf (accessed 14 March 2019), based on an interview with Hood, discusses his interest in Jünger and passages from *The War Journals* (initially published in German in 1949) in particular.
68. Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses*, p. 67.
69. *A Den of Foxes*, which explicitly draws upon the popular genre of Science Fiction, shows how difficult it is to maintain distinctions between the ‘literary’ and the ‘generic’ in practice. Nevertheless, it is significant that Hood draws upon Science Fiction, considered to be one of the more intellectual popular genres. Additionally, Peter Sinclair, *A Den of Foxes’ protagonist, who is a self-declared Marxist like Hood, writes of the genre ‘I have certain problems with SF’ because it typically lacks ‘any convincing account of the modes of life and social organisation of the communities of the future’ (p. 14, p. 15).