

Modern Detective Fiction as a Site of Mourning and Remembrance, and the Importance of Acknowledgement: World War One and the Case of Inspector Ian Rutledge

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Abstract

Modern detective fiction on World War One enables the reader to both remember and come to terms with some of the most tragic and horrific events and consequences of the War. The genre operates as a site of mourning and remembrance that relies on acknowledgement, i.e., a form of active knowledge, expressed in public as the recognition, re-thinking and re-stating aloud of claims that other human beings have on us. Charles Todd's sixteen novels in the Detective Ian Rutledge series invite the reader to take part in investigating crimes that were either committed during the War or that are directly related to events that took place during the War. The stories never fail us because Rutledge does everything he is expected to do: solve the mystery, restore order and reinforce the value and power of moral integrity. The novels tell us important things about how war affects the individual, how it can never be forgotten but – for the right person, how its lessons can also be harnessed in the service of good.

Keywords: mourning, remembrance, acknowledgement, detective, reader, reader response, experience

1. Introduction

Among the major combatants in World War One every family was in mourning for a husband, son, brother, friend, colleague or companion. Remembering the anxiety of the War, Jay Winter argues, also “entailed how to forget” (*Sites of Memory*, 1995, p. 2). Through acts of remembering and forgetting it became possible to transcend the horrific memories of 1914-1918. This article focuses primarily on mourning and remembering in literature, and more particularly, in modern detective fiction set during or immediately after the War. While such literature does not help us to forget the War, it enables us to come to terms with some of the most violent features of it. A pre-requisite for mourning and remembering is acknowledgement, a form of active knowledge, expressed in public as the recognition, re-thinking and re-stating aloud of claims that other human beings have on us (Jay Winter, “The ‘moral witness’ and the two world wars”, 2007, p. 474). Winter explores this term in relation to so-called “moral witnesses”, i.e. those who experienced at first hand the cruelties of the War and who possessed direct knowledge that was denied those who had not seen active service. Non-combatants made claims on the moral witnesses to share their experiences. Charles Todd's Ian Rutledge is a moral witness. He is asked to talk about the War but, like ex-soldiers and detectives in reality, he is reluctant to do so partly because the knowledge is painful and partly because it can never be understood by those who were not “there”. As a detective investigating crimes directly related to the War, however, he not only has an obligation to remember in order to witness to others but his very career depends on remembering what he has seen and experienced at the front if he is to understand and even improve the present.

Todd emphasises that all his Rutledge novels are based on extensive historical investigation; at the same time it should be remembered that they are also imaginative creations. In an interview in 1997 he argued:

If you stick with only the facts all the way, you'll have a treatise, not a novel. That said, however, I feel strongly about getting it right, and I try very hard. . . . If I can't document something, I take the next best route – was it possible? Would it have happened, even if nobody was there to take notes? Is it in keeping with what did happen? Is it real and realistic, not just a plot twist for its own sake? (Kennison, p. 181)

Charles Todd's (Note 1) immensely successful Ian Rutledge series answers not only our desire for more knowledge about the War but also our culture's appetite for imagined violence and extreme emotions; at the

same time, it also explores our fascination with the power of agonising memories and how we come to terms with these. Furthermore, it invites the reader to share the horrors of the War, bear the burden of guilt and recognise the sacrifices not only of those who died but also of those who survived and must find ways in which to mourn – and move on. As with all detective stories, the reader becomes part of the plot, disentangling the clues and sharing the responsibility to understand and to resolve. The detective story as a site of memory is thus in part the reader's own creation, the product of his or her experience. As readers we must pay close attention to detail, harness our existing knowledge and be willing to exercise our imagination.

1.1 *The Text as the Reader's Creation, Experience and Reader-Response Criticism*

Experience, as Joan Wallach Scott has demonstrated, is not something that individuals *have* but that which *constitutes* individuals. In her famous essay on "The evidence of experience" she argues:

Experience . . . becomes not the origin of our explanation, not the authoritative (because seen or felt) evidence that grounds what is known, but rather that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced. (1991, pp. 779-80)

Knowledge is based on experience; it is active and produced in response to the acknowledgement on the part of oneself or others of the need for explanation. It has a firm moral basis in detective fiction because the story does not simply terminate but has a proper closure, one of the primary pre-requisites for historical fiction to be perceived as "real" (Note 2). The three Ian Rutledge novels discussed here, *A Test of Wills* (1996. This is the first Ian Rutledge novel), *Watchers of Time* (2001) and *A False Mirror* (2007) can be seen as acts of mourning and remembrance that both acknowledge and answer the need for explanation as to why individuals acted as they did in the 1500 days of war and with what consequences for themselves and their environment not only at the time but also later (Note 3).

In accordance with the basic principle of Reader-Response criticism, it is the experience and responses of the reader that give the story its meaning. Readers have two primary expectations of detective stories: the detective will solve the crime, and order will be restored. Establishing order is the primary moral function of detective fiction. Indeed, as Mary Evans demonstrates, the detective is the chief upholder of morality, "its limits, its meaning and its value" (2009, 2). The reader expects to have his/her expectations of the moral (and immoral) basis of the actions of both the criminal and the detective confirmed as well as challenged. As Evans argues, morality is part of a continuum between good and evil. Since, according to Reader-Response critics, the meanings of the text are at least in part the production or creation of the individual reader, there is no "correct" meaning for all readers either in terms of the linguistic parts or of the artistic whole of a text: each response is "a reflection of the shifting motivations and perceptions of the reader at the moment" (Steven Lynn, 2001, p. 57). As the reader is taken through an evolving process of anticipation, frustration, retrospection, reconstruction and satisfaction, he or she constructs a version of the story that is deeply personal. In the case of the novels discussed here, this story links the events of the War not only to the present of the novel, i.e. Britain in the 1920s, but also to the present of the reader. The narrator poses the questions, "what can we learn from the War?" and "how, as readers, can we relate this knowledge and experience to our daily lives?"

2. The Three Novels in Brief

In *A Test of Wills*, Rutledge investigates the sudden and unexpected murder of a popular colonel while out riding on his estate. *Watchers of Time* explores the hidden secrets of a community in which a series of seemingly disconnected murders has taken place whose origins go back to the sinking of the Titanic in 1912 and whose solution requires not only Rutledge's expertise but the observations of a shell-shocked soldier, whose credibility is called into question by all except Rutledge himself. *A False Mirror* investigates the disappearance of an unconscious and brutalised murder victim. The accused is an officer who served with Rutledge in the trenches in France and was sent back to England under suspicious circumstances. The three novels have been selected because they show very clearly the importance of mourning, remembering, experience and acknowledgement at three different points in Rutledge's career: directly after he has returned from the trenches in France (*A Test of Wills*), one year after the end of the War (*Watchers of Time*), and in 1920 (*A False Mirror*). In the latter novel, the case closely mirrors Rutledge's past and makes painfully clear to him that the horrors witnessed at the front must first be faced if they are to be understood and then harnessed in the service of justice wherever the general good can be served.

2.1 *A Test of Wills*

It is established by the narrator at the very beginning of the novel that Ian Rutledge has only just returned from the trenches in France. He is chosen to investigate the murder of Colonel Harris because, like the colonel, he is a

countryman, and because he has a reputation from before the War of being able to solve particularly difficult and sensitive cases (p. 3). Although declared fit to return to police duties, Rutledge is still “drawn and thin” (4). He is suffering from shell shock and troubled by a voice in his head, that of Private Hamish, whom he had been forced to court-martial at the Battle of the Somme in 1916 for refusing to “go over the top” (i.e. leave the safety of the trench; Hamish realised that such an act was suicidal). Rutledge acknowledges to himself that Hamish was morally right but he also recognises that because the young soldier had disobeyed orders, he had no choice but to levy the highest penalty. Throughout the series, Hamish takes every opportunity to remind Rutledge of what he did in 1916; Hamish is only occasionally silent. While Rutledge mourns his action and particularly the fact that Hamish was engaged to be married, he also recognises that he it was his duty as an officer and that it was essential for maintaining discipline. Back in civilian life, he tries to disguise his torment, keeps Hamish’s voice a secret, and buries himself in solving crimes as a form of recompense and means of escape from the recent past.

The tragedy of Colonel Harris’s murder is enhanced at the beginning of the novel by the contrast between the beauty of the day: a warm morning in June, with early mists that are gradually succumbing to the rays of the sun and “rising like wraiths in no hurry to be gone” (1) and the extreme brutality of the murder. The Colonel’s body, “savage, wild” and “ripped by black fury” (p. 1) both surprises and disturbs Rutledge: why should Harris die “hard, unwilling, railing at God”? Is he guilty of some terrible crime or is he innocent, the chance victim of a confused or deranged murderer?

Only a detective with knowledge, experience and authority can handle the case. Rutledge is this man because he is an ex-officer with vast experience of death and suffering. Indeed, the narrator observes on several occasions that Rutledge has a special kind of authority in his professional role. A case in point is when he requests an audience with the daughter of Colonel Harris: his voice is “firm, that of an army officer giving instructions, brooking no further opposition. Certainly not the voice of a lowly policeman begging entrance” (p. 23). Rutledge proves himself to be capable of combining the authority of an army officer with the sensitivity and intelligence of a detective. He knows when to be firm and when to tread carefully.

As the case becomes more and more complex, and Hamish’s voice interrupts and taunts him, Rutledge is unsure if he can meet the high expectations of both his employer, Scotland Yard, and the local community. Who is the murderer? And how will he convince the jury once he has discovered his or her identity? The jury demands facts, not memories or intuition, the narrator emphasises. The community expects a quick resolution, taking the easy option of blaming Daniel Hickam, a shell-shocked soldier who is often drunk and is generally viewed as both a coward and a blight on the village. Rutledge knows better thanks to his experience of the War, recognising that Hickam is tormented by his memories, a prisoner of both his own mind and of his recent past. It is significant that it is only Rutledge who can talk to Hickam and extract from him one of the most important facts about the murder of Colonel Harris, i.e. that the Colonel’s “daughter”, Lettice Wood, is not mourning for the Colonel as her guardian, as all suppose, but as her lover, thereby making Lettice Wood’s fiancé a prime suspect. Rutledge now also understands that the gallant Colonel, respected for his exemplary service at the front, was also weak and vulnerable.

The reader notes the thoroughness with which Rutledge carries out his investigations. As he sits in his room going over his notes “until the walls seemed to close in on him” (p. 102), he searches for “illumination” and “connections” (p. 102). Rutledge needs “proper evidence” (102). This must come in part from Lettice Wood as the one who was closest to the victim. Using the knowledge that he had gained from the War when he witnessed soldiers reach breaking point, Rutledge knows how to extract the maximum of information from Lettice without pushing her beyond her limits. When he sees that she is about to break down, for example, he softens his voice, pitching it at the same time “to reach her through the emotional frenzy” (139). He does this while Hamish is busy accusing him of unprofessionally harsh treatment. Rutledge, however, knows what he is doing and inspires confidence not only among members of the community but also in the reader.

Nonetheless, he does doubt himself on occasions: half way through the investigation, for example, when he is beginning to feel that he has made little progress, he wonders if he has lost the “strong vein of intuition that once had made him particularly good at understanding why the victim had to die.” (p. 181). At such times, Rutledge must remind himself of his experience of “the darkest corners of the human mind” (p. 182) and that it is this experience that will serve him well in trying to understand the criminal’s mind. Indeed, his occasional periods of doubt, far from making him weak, become sources of strength; they also provide valuable opportunities for the reader to gain insight into the detective’s methods and experiences. It is at such points that the reader is encouraged to both sympathise with as well as attempt to outwit the detective by solving the mystery before Rutledge does.

Rutledge is alone in recognising that Daniel Hickam has vital evidence that can solve the mystery. As he interrogates the shell-shocked soldier, he uses the same technique he had used with wounded soldiers who had crossed No Man's Land: with a firm and level voice, he extracts the necessary information, allowing Hickam periods of uninterrupted silence while at the same time confirming his belief in him: "I'll believe it. I swear it. Tell me", he says. Rutledge knows when he has heard the truth and can now begin to piece together the last few hours of Colonel Harris's life.

Significantly, the novel ends with the acknowledgement that Rutledge is an excellent detective, he refuses to be cowed by the voice of Hamish, and his knowledge of the War remains sufficiently active for him to draw on it when necessary. He is committed to using it in the service of law and order – the primary moral duty of a detective. This commitment sets the tone for all the novels in the Rutledge series and is thus quoted in full below:

[Rutledge] felt waves of black depression settling over him, swamping him.

No! he told himself fiercely.

No, I won't give into it. I'll fight. And by God, somehow I'll survive! I solved this murder. The skills are there, I've *ouched* them – and I will use them again! Whatever else I've lost, this one triumph is mine.

"Ye'll no' triumph over me!" Hamish said. "I'm a scare on your bluidy soul."

"That may be", Rutledge told him harshly. "But I'll find out before it's finished what we're both made of!" (p. 305)

And that is indeed what Rutledge does because as he mourns the losses and suffering of the War and acknowledges the claims others have on him to succeed as a detective, he strives to conquer, or at the very least neutralise the voice in his head. He always solves the crime thereby restoring order and confirming the value and importance of moral integrity. Rutledge knows that "[t]here's always a next time" (p. 305), and, as the novels that follow demonstrate, he is always ready.

2.2 *Watchers of Time*

The fifth novel in Todd's series finds Rutledge on medical leave from Scotland Yard. He is plagued by nightmares, "raw, brutal, barbarous" (p. 21) events that could be shared with no one because they can only be understood by those who were "there". The reader is informed that Rutledge had repeatedly tried "to die during the last two years of the War, putting himself in the way of danger, courting the unholy bombardments that splintered the earth, daring the hidden machine-gun nests that rake No Man's Land with lethal fire" (p. 33). In a powerful simile, Rutledge is compared to "a lover embracing a bloody mistress" (p. 33) who, against the odds, comes through "unscathed" (p. 33). And yet, as the reader already knows, he is not entirely unscathed; he avoids talking about the War whenever possible. On the rare occasions that he consents to talk about it, he is careful to tailor his story to the background and character of the listener: it is not his purpose to tell the truth (the narrator claims that Rutledge gives "only a small measure" (p. 21) of the truth in each tale) but to provide as short an account as possible that will fulfil his listener's expectations. His tales thus address a wide range of subjects, including the incessant rain and squelching mud, acts of bravery that he had witnessed or small kindnesses offered by nurses. In this way Rutledge fulfils his duty of acknowledgement to those who had not been at the front – but in a very limited way and only when he cannot escape the requests of his listeners. One important reason why Rutledge avoids telling stories is that he feels guilt in having survived the War. He explains this to a fellow policeman as follows:

I came back from the War broken by the waste of it . . . It was a bloody waste of lives and we brought home nothing – *nothing!* – to show for four years of dying in trenches not fit for swine. I asked no favors from anyone, and I received none. I did my job as well as I knew how, just as every other man back from the Front tried to do his. No one gave me back my past, and no one will hand me my future. (p. 219)

While Rutledge is hailed as a hero, he knows that the real source of his bravery is that he has "no fear of dying" (33). His job is his best means of coping with his memories and his guilt, enabling him to make sense of these as he harnesses their lessons in the service of justice.

In *Watchers of Time*, Rutledge encounters a particularly complex set of murders, all related to the "disappearance" of Arthur Sedgwick's wife. By this stage in his career, he has learned the importance of being objective in his work, concluding that "[m]ost mistakes were made by the human element – the refusal to be objective" (p. 78). At the same time, he has a special ability to listen that encourages people to give him information that might otherwise have been withheld. What is the motive behind the "disappearance" of Arthur

Sedgwick's wife and the murder of Father James? Are the two cases related? Characteristically, Rutledge harnesses the help of a shell-shocked soldier, Peter Henderson, whom members of the community dismiss as mad and unpredictable. Rutledge, however, knows better. While other members of the community, including Peter's own father, condemn him for being a sniper, Rutledge is the only one to acknowledge the importance of soldiers like Peter during the War; and he is alone in appreciating the mental acuity of the sniper, a quality that makes him a particularly valuable witness.

In addition to his experience of the War, the narrator of *Watchers of Time* draws attention to Rutledge's ability to listen, which invariably results in the revelation of important evidence. When Hamish tries to distract Rutledge and call into question his conclusions, Rutledge emphasises that he does not judge, he merely observes and listens. This quality is emphasised throughout the series because it is one of the major differences between Rutledge's methods and those of his fellow policemen.

As he investigates the murder of Father James and discovers that the latter had uncovered the truth about the disappearance of Arthur's wife, i.e. that she was murdered, Rutledge wonders how long it had taken the Father to put together "the strands of truth" that became "knowledge" (p. 245). Rutledge is acutely aware that it has taken him many weeks to discover the link between the murder of Arthur's wife and that of Father James. Only when he has done this can he rest as he has fulfilled his moral and professional responsibility to restore order to a shattered community.

2.3 *A False Mirror*

The ninth novel in the Rutledge series reminds the reader that he was close to breaking point during the War. Rutledge was "a man emotionally destroyed, trying desperately to protect his men, and all the while, the voice of a dead man ringing in his head and in his dreams and in his ears" (p. 13). In the following four short statements the narrator explains why the War continues to haunt Rutledge: "The war. So many things came round to the war. He couldn't escape it, no matter where he turned. For him it had never really ended" (p. 53). In the first two statements, the noun "war" is repeated. In the last two, it has become "it", the unnamed from which there is no escape. The addition of the adverb "really" in the final sentence emphasises that the battle has not ended but merely changed location, to Rutledge's mind, where Hamish is also to be found.

The crime committed in *A False Mirror* comes particularly close to home because the suspect, Lieutenant Mallory, is well-known to Rutledge as they had served together at the front. Suspected of murder and of holding Felicity Hamilton hostage, Mallory holds Rutledge in high esteem and will only surrender to him. Significantly, as Mallory explains to Rutledge why he is holding Felicity hostage, the narrator comments that it was easier for Rutledge to talk to Mallory about the War than to his own sister, Francis, because Mallory was there and can thus understand:

[i]t was something he hadn't expected, this isolation. At first he'd believed it was his own need, his own desperation that locked the war in silence. A vain hope for time and peace in which to heal. Now he realized that somehow those who had served in France and elsewhere knew a world that couldn't be shared. How could he tell his sister – or even his father, if the elder Rutledge was still alive – what had been done on bloody ground far from home? It would be criminal to fill their minds with scenes that no one should have to remember. No one. (p. 191)

Characteristically, despite repeated requests for stories about the War, Rutledge's sister receives no information from her brother because Rutledge knows how to deflect her interest. In the above passage the narrator makes abundantly clear the limitations of Rutledge's duty of acknowledgement as the detective himself sees it by distinguishing between his responsibilities to those who have lived the stories and those who have not. The adjective "criminal" in the final sentence refers both to the legal system and the code of morality by which Rutledge is bound as a detective. After painstaking investigation, Rutledge discovers the link between Mallory and Felicity Hamilton (they had once been lovers). He does not, however, allow this fact to distract him from viewing the facts objectively. When he discovers the motive for the murders and also the murder weapon, he is also able to reveal the unlikely truth: it is the one whose job it is to save lives, i.e. the local doctor, who is the murderer and not the ex-lover, Mallory.

Once the truth is revealed, the narrator inserts a confession made by Mallory to Rutledge that summarises how the War has affected the detective (Mallory is the first speaker):

I was the best soldier I knew how to be. We weren't all cut from the same cloth.

"If you're asking my forgiveness, you've come to the wrong person. For my sins, I have no right to judge you or anyone else."

Every time I looked in my mirror, I saw your face. The man I ought to have been.

“It was a false mirror. What you were searching for was someone to blame. I want no part of it. I have my own nightmares. I don’t need yours.” (p. 398)

While Rutledge is surprised to learn that Mallory admired him at the front, Mallory is equally surprised to learn that Rutledge feels no pride, only misery. Both men are in mourning, both are plagued by their memories, and both acknowledge that they have a duty to go on living despite their pain. The above dialogue is followed by an act of forgiveness which is only spoiled by Hamish’s painful roaring in Rutledge’s ears. The detective’s three simple words to Mallory, “I forgive you” (p. 398), show that it is not only Mallory who has learned important lessons about himself and his past. The reader is satisfied because the resolution not only bodes well for the community but also for Rutledge himself.

3. Experience, knowledge and acknowledgement

The experience of Rutledge at the front and the nature of the crime in the three novels require explanation not only with regard to the fictional characters but also to the reader. Through explanation, the full depth and extent of the characters’ memories of the War are revealed. Rutledge acknowledges that despite the pain of his memories, he has a responsibility to carry out his duties as a detective as efficiently and as effectively as possible. This sometimes entails telling stories about the War, but these are always short and carefully tailored to the listener’s needs and expectations and they only ever represent small measures of the truth. They are told because Rutledge knows that he has a duty to fulfil others’ claims on him both as a survivor of the War and as a detective who must use his knowledge at the front to solve crimes related to the War. As Rutledge brings his experience and skills to bear on each case, uncovering and analysing the clues, the reader not only follows but also takes part in the process, hoping to solve the mystery before Rutledge himself does. The Rutledge stories are sites of mourning and remembrance which are in part the reader’s own creation, the product of his or her own imagination and experience. They never fail us because Rutledge does what he is expected to do: solve the mystery, restore order and reinforce both the value and power of integrity. They also tell us important things about how war affects the individual mentally and emotionally, thereby complementing our existing knowledge and stimulating our interest to learn more.

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Notes

Note 1. Charles Todd co-writes with his mother, Caroline Todd. It is Charles’s name who appears on the front cover of the novels. See (2014, September 9) <http://www.charlestodd.com/author/>

Note 2. See Hayden White’s essay “Storytelling: Historical and Ideological”, in Hayden White (2010). *The Fiction of Narrative. Essays on History, Literature, and Theory 1957-2007* ed. by Robert Doran. Baltimore: The

Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010, pp. 273-292. In this essay White argues that the function of storytelling in historiography is to explain historical events. Narrative accounts, argues White, explain real events “by representing them as possessing the coherence of generic plot-types – epic, comic, tragic, farcical and so on” (p. 280).

Note 3. There are sixteen Ian Rutledge novels: *A Test of Wills* (1996), *Wings of Fire* (1998), *Search the Dark* (1999), *Legacy of the Dead* (2000), *Watchers of Time* (2001), *A Fearsome Doubt* (2002), *A Cold Treachery* (2005), *A Long Shadow* (2006), *A False Mirror* (2007), *A Pale Horse* (2008), *A Matter of Justice* (2009), *The Red Door* (2010), *A Lonely Death* (2011), *The Confession* (2012), *Proof of Guilt* (2013), *Hunting Shadows* (2014). The final Ian Rutledge novel, *A Fine Summer's Day*, is due to appear in January 2015.

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