BARBARA W. TUCHMAN

THE PULITZER PRIZE–WINNING CLASSIC

The Guns of August

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Foreword

DURING THE LAST WEEK OF JANUARY, 1962, John Glenn delayed for the third time his attempt to rocket into space and become the nation's first earth-orbiting human. Bill "Moose" Skowren, the Yankee's veteran first baseman, having had a good year (561 at bats, 28 home runs, 89 runs batted in), was given a $3,000 raise which elevated his annual salary to $35,000. *Franny and Zooey* was at the top of the fiction bestseller list, followed a few notches down by To *Kill a Mockingbird.* At the top of the non-fiction list was My *Life in Court* by Louis Nizer. That week also saw the publication of one of the finest works of history written by an American in our century.

The Guns of August was an immediate, overwhelming success. Reviewers were enthusiastic and word-of-mouth quickly attracted readers by the tens of thousands. President Kennedy gave a copy to Prime Minister Macmillan, observing that somehow contemporary statesmen must avoid the pitfalls that led to August, 1914. The Pulitzer Committee, forbidden by the donor's will to reward a work on a non-American subject with the Prize for History, found a solution by awarding Mrs. Tuchman a Prize for General Nonfiction. *The Guns of August* made the author's reputation; her work thereafter was gripping and elegant, but most readers needed only to know that the new book was "by Barbara Tuchman."

What is it about this book—essentially a military history of the first month of the First World War—which gives it its stamp and has created its enormous reputation? Four qualities stand out: a wealth of vivid detail which keeps the reader immersed in events, almost as an eyewitness; a prose style which is transparently clear, intelligent, controlled, and witty; a cool detachment of moral judgement—Mrs. Tuchman is never preachy or reproachful; she draws on skepticism, not cynicism, leaving the reader not so much outraged by human villainy as amused and saddened by human folly. These first three qualities are present in all of Barbara Tuchman's work, but in *The Guns of August* there is a fourth which makes the book, once taken up, almost impossible to set aside. Remarkably, she persuades the reader to suspend any foreknowledge of what is about to happen. Her narrative sets in motion a gigantic German Army—three field armies,

sixteen army corps, thirty-seven divisions, 700,000 men—wheeling through Belgium, marching on Paris. This tidal wave of men, horses, artillery and carts is cascading down the dusty roads of northern France, sweeping implacably, apparently irresistably, toward its goal of seizing the city and ending the war in the West, just as the the Kaiser's generals had planned, within six weeks. The reader, watching the Germans advance, may already know that they won't arrive, that von Kluck will turn aside and that, after the Battle of the Marne, millions of men on both sides will stumble into the trenches to begin their endurance of four years of slaughter. And yet, so great is Mrs. Tuchman's skill that the reader forgets what he knows. Surrounded by the thunder of guns, the thrust and parry of bayonet and sabre, he becomes almost a participant. Will the exhausted Germans keep coming? Can the desperate French and British hold? Will Paris fall? Mrs. Tuchman's triumph is that she makes the events of August, 1914, as suspenseful on the page as they were to the people living through them.

When *The Guns of August* appeared, Barbara Tuchman was described in the press as a fifty-year-old housewife, a mother of three daughters, and the spouse of a prominent New York City physician. The truth was more complicated and interesting. She was descended from two of the great intellectual and commercial Jewish families of New York City. Her grandfather, Henry Morgenthau, Sr., was Ambassador to Turkey during the First World War. Her uncle, Henry Morgenthau, Jr., was Franklin Roosevelt's Secretary of the Treasury for over twelve years. Mrs. Tuchman's father, Maurice Wertheim, had founded an investment banking house. Her childhood homes were a five-story brownstone on the Upper East Side, at which a French governess read aloud to her from Racine and Cor-neille, and a country house with barns and horses in Connecticut. There were dinners with a father who had forbidden mention of Franklin D. Roosevelt. One day, the adolescent daughter transgressed and was commanded to leave her chair. Sitting very straight, Barbara said, "I am too old to be sent away from the table." Her father stared in amazement—but she remained.

When the time came for Mrs. Tuchman to graduate from Radcliffe, she skipped the ceremony, preferring to accompany her grandfather to the World Monetary and Economic Conference in London where he headed the U.S. delegation. She spent a year in Tokyo as a research assistant for the Institute of Pacific Relations, and then became a fledgling writer at *The*

Nation, which her father had bought to save it from bankruptcy. At twenty-four, she covered the Spanish Civil War from Madrid.

In June, 1940, on the day Hitler entered Paris, she married Dr. Lester Tuchman in New York City. Dr. Tuchman, about to go off to war, believed that the world just then was an unpromising place to bring up children. Mrs. Tuchman replied that "if we wait for the outlook to improve, we might wait forever and that if we want a child at all, we should have it now, regardless of Hitler." The first of their daughters was born nine months later. During the forties and fifties, Mrs. Tuchman dovetailed raising children and writing her first books. *Bible and Sword,* a history of the founding of Israel, appeared in 1954; *The Zimmermann Telegram* followed in 1958. The latter, an account of the German Foreign Minister's 1917 attempt to lure Mexico into war with the United States by promising the return of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California, written with high style and wry humor, was a taste of things to come.

Over the years, as *The Guns of August* was followed by *The Proud Tower, Stilwell and the American Experience in China, A Distant Mirror, The March of Folly,* and *The First Salute,* Barbara Tuchman came to be regarded almost as a national treasure. People wondered how she did it. In a number of speeches and essays (collected into a volume titled *Practicing History),* she told them. The first, indispensable quality she declared was "being in love with your subject." She described one of her professors at Harvard, a man passionately in love with the Magna Carta, remembering "how his blue eyes blazed as he discussed it and how I sat on the edge of my seat then too." She admitted how depressed she was years later by meeting an unhappy graduate student forced to write a thesis, not on a subject about which he was enthusiastic, but which had been suggested by his department as needful of original research. How can it interest others, she wondered, if it doesn't interest you? Her own books were about people or events which intrigued her. Something caught her eye, she looked into it, and, whether the subject was obscure or well-known, if she found her curiousity growing, she kept going. In the end, she managed to bring to each of her subjects new facts, new perspectives, new life, and new meaning. Of this particular August, she found that "there was an aura about 1914 that caused those who sensed it to shiver for mankind." Once she communicates her own fascination, her readers, bourne along by her passion and skill, never escape her narrative clutch.

She began with research; that is, by accumulating facts. She had read widely all her life, but her purpose now was to immerse herself in this time and these events; to put herself at the elbow of the people whose lives she was describing. She read letters, telegrams, diaries, memoirs, cabinet documents, battle orders, secret codes, and *billet doux.* She inhabited libraries—the New York Public Library, the Library of Congress, the National Archives, the British Library and Public Record Office, the Biblioteque National, the Sterling Library at Yale, and the Widener Library at Harvard. (As a student, she recalled, the stacks at the Widener had been "my Archimedes bathtub, my burning bush, my dish of mold where I found my personal penicillin... I was blissful as a cow put to graze in a field of fresh clover and would not have cared if I had been locked in for the night.") One summer before writing *The Guns of August*, she rented a small Renault and toured the battlefields of Belgium and France: "I saw the fields ripe with grain which the cavalry would have trampled, measured the great width of the Meuse at Liege, and saw how the lost territory of Alsace looked to the French soldiers who gazed down upon it from the heights of the Vosges." In libraries, on battlefields, at her desk, her quarry was always the vivid, specific fact which would imprint on the reader's mind the essential nature of the man or event. Some examples:

The Kaiser: the "possessor of the least inhibited tongue in Europe."

The Archduke Franz Ferdinand: "the future source of tragedy, tall, corpulent, and corseted, with green plumes waving from his helmet."

Von Schlieffen, architect of the German war plan: "of the two classes of Prussian officer, the bullnecked and the wasp-waisted, he belonged to the second."

Joffre, the French commander-in-chief: "massive and paunchy in his baggy uniform... Joffre looked like Santa Claus and gave an impression of benevolence and naivete—two qualities not noticeably part of his character."

Sukhomlinov, the Russian Minister of War: "artful, indolent, pleasure-loving, chubby... with an almost feline manner," who, "smitten by the twenty-three-year-old wife of a provincial governor, contrived to get rid of the husband by divorce on framed evidence and marry the beautiful residue as his fourth wife."

The larger purpose in Barbara Tuchman's research was to find out, simply, what really happened and, as best she could, how it actually felt for

the people present. She had little use for systems or systemizers in history and quoted approvingly an anonymous reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* who said, “The historian who puts his system first can hardly escape the heresy of preferring the facts which suit his system best.” She recommended letting the facts lead the way. “To find out what happened in history is enough at the outset,” she said, “without trying too soon to make sure of the ‘why.’ I believe it is safer to leave the ‘why’ alone until one has not only gathered the facts but arranged them in sequence; to be exact, in sentences, paragraphs, and chapters. The very process of transforming a collection of personalities, dates, gun calibers, letters, and speeches into a narrative eventually forces the ‘why’ to the surface.”

The problem with research, of course, was knowing when to stop. “One must stop before one has finished,” she advised, “otherwise, one will never stop and never finish.” “Research,” she explained, “is endlessly seductive, but writing is hard work.” Eventually, however, she began to select, to distill, to give the facts coherence, to create patterns, to construct narrative form; in short, to write. The writing process, she said, was “laborious, slow, often painful, sometimes agony. It requires rearrangement, revision, adding, cutting, rewriting. But it brings a sense of excitement, almost of rapture, a moment on Olympus.” Surprisingly, it took years for her to develop her famous style. Her thesis at Radcliffe came back with a note: “Style undistinguished.” Her first book *Bible and Sword* collected thirty rejection slips before it found a publisher. She persisted and ultimately arrived at a formula that worked : “hard work, a good ear, and continued practice.”

Mrs. Tuchman believed most of all in the power of “that magnificent instrument that lies at the command of all of us—the English language.” Indeed, her allegiance often was split between her subject and the instrument for expressing it. “I am a writer first whose subject is history,” she said, and, “The art of writing interests me as much as the art of history... I am seduced by the sound of words and by the interaction of their sounds and sense.” Sometimes, when she believed that she had arrived at a particularly felicitous phrase or sentence or paragraph, she wanted to share it immediately and telephoned her editor to read it to him. Precisely controlled, elegant language, she felt, was the instrument to give voice to history. Her ultimate objective was “to make the reader turn the page.”

In a time of mass-culture egalitarianism and mediocrity, she was an elitist. For her, the two essential criteria of quality were “intensive effort

and honesty of purpose. The difference is not only a matter of artistic skill, but of intent. You do it well or you do it half well," she said.

Her relations with academics, critics, and reviewers were wary. She did not have a Ph.D. "It's what saved me, I think," she said, believing that the requirements of conventional academic life can stultify imagination, stifle enthusiasm and deaden prose style. "The academic historian," she said, "suffers from having a captive audience, first in the supervisor of his dissertation, then in the lecture hall. Keeping the reader turning the page has not been his primary concern." Someone suggested that she might enjoy teaching. "Why should I teach?," she responsed vigorously. "I am a writer! I don't want to teach! I couldn't teach if I tried!" For her, a writer's place was in the library or the field doing research, or at the desk, writing. Herodotus, Thucydides, Gibbon, MacCauley, and Parkman, she noted, did not have Ph.D.s.

Mrs. Tuchman was stung when reviewers, especially academic reviewers, sniffed that her work was "popular history," implying that because it sold a great many copies, it failed to meet their own exacting standards. She routinely ignored the policy most writers observe of never responding to negative reviews, because to do so simply provokes the reviewer and opens further avenues of harm. She fired right back. "I have noticed," she wrote to *The New* Yorfc *Times,* "that reviewers who are in a great hurry to complain of an author's failure to include this or that have usually themselves failed to read the text under review." And again: "Nonfiction authors understand that reviewers must find some error to expose in order to show their own erudition and we wait especially to know what it will be." Eventually, most academics were won over—or, at least, backed away from confrontation. Over the years, she gave addresses at, and collected degrees from, many of the greatest universities in the land, won two Pulitzer Prizes, and became the first woman elected president of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in its eighty-year existence.

For all the combativeness of her professional personality, there was a rare tolerance in Barbara Tuchman's writing. The vain, the pompous, the greedy, the foolish, the cowardly—all were described in human terms and, where possible, given the benefit of the doubt. A good example of this is her analysis of why Sir John French, the previously fiery commander of the British Expeditionary Force in France, seemed unwilling to send his troops

into battle: “Whether the cause was [Minister of War, Lord] Kitchener’s instructions with their emphasis on keeping the army in being and their caution against ‘losses and wastage,’ or whether it was a sudden realization percolating into Sir John French’s consciousness that behind the BEF was no national body of trained reserves to take its place, or whether on reaching the Continent within a few miles of a formidable enemy and certain battle the weight of responsibility oppressed him, or whether all along beneath his bold words and manner the natural juices of courage had been invisibly drying up... no one who has not been in the same position can judge.”

Barbara Tuchman wrote history to tell the story of human struggle, achievement, frustration, and defeat, not to draw moral conclusions. Nevertheless, *The Guns of August* offers lessons. Foolish monarchs, diplomats, and generals blundered into a war nobody wanted, an Armageddon which evolved with the same grim irreversability as a Greek tragedy. “In the month of August, 1914,” she wrote, “there was something looming, inescapable, universal that involved us all. Something in that awful gulf between perfect plans and fallible men that makes one tremble with a sense of There but for the Grace of God go we.’ “ Her hope was that people reading her book might take warning, avoid these mistakes, and do a little better. It was this effort and these lessons which attracted presidents and prime ministers as well as millions of ordinary readers.

Family and work dominated Barbara Tuchman’s life. What gave her the most pleasure was to sit at a table, writing. She permitted no distractions. Once, after she was famous, her daughter Alma told her that Jane Fonda and Barbra Strei-sand wanted her to write a movie script. She shook her head. “But, Ma,” said Alma, “don’t you even want to meet Jane Fonda?” “Oh, no,” said Mrs. Tuchman. “I don’t have time. I’m working.” She wrote her first drafts in longhand on a yellow legal .pad with “everything messed up and x’d out and inserted.” She followed with drafts on the typewriter, triple-spaced, ready to be scissored apart and Scotch-taped back together in a different sequence. Customarily, she worked for four or five hours at a stretch, without interruption. “The summer she was finishing *The Guns of August,”* her daughter Jessica remembers, “she was behind schedule and desperate to catch up... To get away from the telephone she set up a card table and a chair in an old dairy attached to the stables—a room that was cold even in summer. She would go to work at 7:30 A.M. My job was to

bring her lunch on a tray at 12:30 P.M.—a sandwich, V-8 juice, a piece of fruit. Every day, approaching silently on the pine needles that surrounded the stables, I'd find her in the same position, always engrossed. At 5 P.M. or so she stopped."

One of the paragraphs Barbara Tuchman wrote that summer took her eight hours to complete and became the most famous passage in all her work. It is the opening paragraph of *The Guns of August* which begins "So gorgeous was the spectacle on the May morning of 1910..." By turning the page, the fortunate person who has not yet encountered this book can begin to read.

—ROBERT K. MASSIE