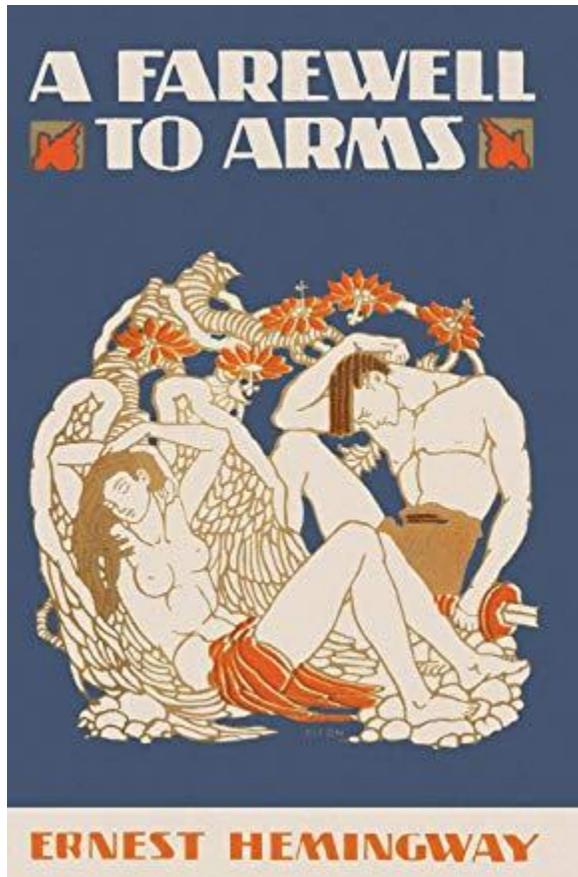


# A Farewell to Arms

By Rod Fraser

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I FIRST READ Ernest Hemingway's famous novel, *A Farewell to Arms*, when I was twenty-two. It was while I attended Ryerson University in 1968. Five

decades later, I still recall with fondness the great books we studied, read and discussed in those years.

It didn't hurt that *A Farewell to Arms* was a story of young love, the devastation of war and the realities faced by an earlier generation of young men and women. With a war raging in Vietnam in 1968, my limited experience of young love, and an unsettled world around me, this book seemed relevant to my life and a great story—all wrapped into one.

*A Farewell to Arms* is the last of the books I intend to review on the Great War. Then I'll finish the series with the story of my grandfather's early life and war years.

With my reviews and family history of the First World War complete, I will move on to other books and topics. Like Robert Graves, I will say *Goodbye to All That*.

ERNEST HEMINGWAY WAS born in July 1899 and attempted to enlist in the United States army when he turned eighteen—a few months after the United States entered the war. He was turned away because of poor vision.

Later that year, when he heard the Red Cross were taking volunteers for an ambulance corps, he

gave up his job as a young reporter at the Kansas City Star and signed up.

In May of 1918, he sailed for Europe, visited Paris, and then traveled to the Italian Front. Within a few weeks of working as an ambulance driver along the Piave River, Hemingway was wounded by shrapnel and evacuated to a hospital in Milan. It was during this time he met and fell in love with Agnes von Kurowsky, a nurse who cared for him at the hospital.



*Ernest Hemingway circa 1918*

In January of 1919, Hemingway returned home from the war (Miss Korowsky having written to tell him she had fallen in love with another) and briefly lived with his parents in Oak Park, a suburb of Chicago. It was during this time he started writing short stories while working as a journalist. He was

offered a job with the Toronto Star, readily accepted and lived briefly in Canada.

Back in Chicago in 1920, while still writing for the Toronto Star, Hemingway met and then married Hadley Richardson. The following year, the young couple left for Paris (where the first of his three sons was born). Hemingway had accepted a job as European correspondent for the Toronto Star.

There is much that could be said of Hemingway's later life, but I will leave that for another person at another time. My mission here is a review of *A Farewell to Arms*, so with this brief introduction to the author concluded, I will do exactly that.

To prepare for this task, I read *A Farewell to Arms* once again and watched the 1957 film version, starring Rock Hudson and Jennifer Jones.

An earlier film version, starring Gary Cooper and Helen Hayes, also exists, but the 1957 version was readily available at my library and beautifully filmed in colour. I recommend it. It is quite moving, if a little sentimental.

HEMINGWAY'S NOVEL IS set in Italy during the First World War. Frederic Henry, an American, is a lieutenant in the ambulance corps of the Italian Army. Here he meets Catherine Barkley, an English nurse, who works in a nearby British hospital.

Catherine is not a fully-qualified nurse, but a V.A.D. volunteer who has signed on for the duration of the war. The nursing need was so great during the war years, that young women were recruited (and briefly trained) to provide nursing care for soldiers near the front and in larger hospitals to the rear.

Although Catherine is grieving from the death of her fiancé, she begins to fall in love with Henry. When he returns to the front—and is wounded—he is taken to the American hospital in Milan. Catherine is also transferred to this hospital, where they fall deeply in love and hope for a future together.

Henry's wound is serious, but after a successful operation and a number of weeks of convalescence, he is again sent to the front—at a time when the Italians have taken the offensive against the Austrian army in Northern Italy. A short time before his departure, Catherine tells Henry she is pregnant.

When Henry arrives at the front, he finds the offensive has ground to a halt. The army is soon forced into retreat when German divisions join their Austrian allies (after the collapse of the Russia army on the Eastern Front). This retreat is one of the most dramatic accounts in the novel.

HENRY IS ORDERED to take the ambulances under his command and join the evacuation heading south.

Finding the roads clogged with refugees, army vehicles, retreating troops and mud, he soon decides to leave the column and use side roads to find a faster route to the new defensive lines and safety.

When the ambulances finally bog down in the unrelenting mud, Henry is forced to shoot a soldier when he refuses to help dig the vehicles out. But it is of no use. Despite their efforts to free the ambulances, they remain mired in the mud. Henry, with his remaining drivers, set off on foot to find Udine and safety.

Unfortunately, the retreat is no longer orderly. It is now chaos and mayhem. The rear guard are shooting soldiers they suspect as spies and other soldiers have taken to shooting officers because they are angered by the Italian retreat.

It is now mob rule and no one is safe. Henry is particularly vulnerable as he is an American wearing the uniform of an Italian officer.

When the rear guard grab Henry, he breaks away and escapes by diving in the river. He swims downstream, exits the river and finds his way to Milan by train, hiding under a tarp covering various artillery pieces.

Henry is now finished with the war. He wants to find Catherine and leave Italy for the safety of Switzerland.

Catherine agrees with this plan and they escape, rowing a boat to safety across a large lake. Soon they put the war behind them, as they rent a home in a lovely Swiss village for the winter, waiting for their baby to be born. All is well and the war is far behind them.

I won't give away the ending. You can read it on your own. The book is readily available at libraries everywhere, and inexpensive to buy. Do yourself a favor; get a copy. Be sure to bring along your Kleenex. It is very moving and sad. The film version is even more so.

In an interview in 1958, Hemingway told George Pimpton he "rewrote the ending to *A Farewell to Arms* thirty-nine times" to get it right. Keep that in mind when you read the book.

In a ranking of Hemingway's books, many critics rank this as Number One. I have no quarrel with their opinion. It is simply a wonderful story.

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