

# Falklands-Malvinas An Unfinished Business

Bernard McGuirk

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New Ventures  
Seattle  
2007

*Falklands-Malvinas: An Unfinished Business*  
by Bernard McGuirk

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First published in the USA by New Ventures, Seattle, 2007

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ISBN (USA) 978-1-60271-001-6 (cloth)  
978-1-60271-002-3 (paperbound)

ISBN (UK) 978-1-905510-05-4 (hardcover)  
978-1-905510-06-1 (paperback)

First edition

Cover design by Hannibal

Printed by Tipografia Guerra, Viseu, Portugal

# Contents

**Acknowledgments** i

**Preface** iii

## Introduction

**Dubbing cultures** 3

## Fictions of Exhaustion

**On narratives great and small**  
**Further walks in the fictional woods** 13

**Foundational narratives**  
**Warmadillos** 21

*Los pichiciegos/The Armadillos* (1983)

Rodolfo Enrique Fogwill (Argentina)

**Auntie Maggie, all at sea** 39

*La Baleine des Malouines/The Falklands Whale/La ballena de Malvinas* (1983)

Pierre Boulle (France)

**A Farewell to Arms UK, plc.** 48

*Swansong/Canto de cisne* (1986)

Richard Francis (England)

**Defining novels**

**Coming Out in the Dark** 63

*The Story of the Night/Historia de la noche* (1996)

Colm Tóibín (Ireland)

**B.A. Confidential** 81

*El agua electrizada/Electrified Water* (1992)

C. E. Feiling (Argentina)

**Backing a Loser** 94

*Tre cavalli/Tres caballos/Three Horses* (1999)

Erri De Luca (Italy)

**Retrospects**

**Treasure Islands Black Spot** 113

*Anthem/Himno* (2003)

Tim Binding (England)

**The Ten Year Itch – 1992 Annus Horribilis** 128

*Las islas/The Islands* (1998)

Carlos Gamerro (Argentina)

## Lyrics in Conflict

- Dancing with death**  
**Exploding genres** 141
- The patriot game** 142  
Las Malvinas/The Malvinas (1939)  
José Pedroni (Argentina)  
Admiral William Brown/El almirante William Brown (1982)  
Wolfe Tones (Ireland)  
Oda a un pichón de corsario: para el príncipe Andrés/Ode to a Pirate Chick:  
for Prince Andrew (1982)  
Anonymous/Anónimo (Argentina)  
Reina Madre/Queen Mother (1983)  
Raúl Porchetto (Argentina)  
La isla de la buena memoria/Island of Happy Memory (1983)  
Alejandro Lerner (Argentina)
- Soldiers' poems** 147  
Before Battle: On the Surrender of Port Stanley: 14 June 1982/Antes de  
la batalla: Sobre la rendición de Puerto Stanley: 14 de junio 1982 (1982)  
Nigel Price (England)  
Yesterday/Ayer (1982)  
Ken Lukowiak (England)  
Ode to Tumbledown/Oda a Tumbledown (1982)  
A Scots Guardsman/ Un Soldado de la Guardia Escocesa (Scotland)  
El infante/The Infantryman (1982)  
Anónimo/Anonymous (Argentina)  
May 82; The Thirty Yard Dash; Je Touche Moi; PTSD; One More/Mayo 82;  
Treinta precipitadas yardas; Je Touche Moi; El trastorno de estrés  
postraumático; Uno más (1982-2002)  
James Love (Scotland)
- Dissenting voices** 161  
No bombardeen Buenos Aires/Don't Bombard Buenos Aires (1982)  
Charly García (Argentina)  
Island of No Return/La isla del no regreso (1984)  
Billy Bragg (England)  
I Love a Man in Uniform/Me gustan los hombres uniformados (1982)  
Gang of Four (England)  
Shipbuilding/Astilleros (1983)  
Elvis Costello (England)  
Miss Maggie/Señorita Maggie (1985)  
Renaud Séchan (France)
- Transcendental echoes** 171  
Juan López y John Ward/Juan López and John Ward (1982)  
Jorge Luis Borges (Argentina)  
Poema con traducción simultánea Español-Español

Poem with Simultaneous Translation Spanish-Spanish (1987)  
 Susana Thénon (Argentina)  
 Elegy for the Welsh Dead in the Falkland Islands/Elegía para los muertos galeses  
 en las Islas Malvinas (1986)  
 Tony Conran (Wales)  
 Milonga del muerto/Milonga of the Dead Man (1985)  
 Jorge Luis Borges (Argentina)

**Cycles of betrayal**

192

Poker in the Falklands with Henry and Jim; Poet for our Times/Poker en Las  
 Malvinas con Henry y Jim; Poeta para nuestros tiempos (1985; 1990)  
 Carol Ann Duffy (Scotland/England)  
 Punto fonal Tango con vector crítico/Phonal Stop Tango with a Critical  
 Slant (1987)  
 Susana Thénon (Argentina)  
 Las tías/Aunts (1987)  
 Néstor Perlongher (Argentina)  
 O último tango nas Malvinas/El último tango en Las Malvinas/Last Tango in  
 Malvinas (1985)  
 Affonso Romano de Sant'Anna (Brazil)  
 A Daniel... un chico de la guerra/To Daniel... a Kid of War (1985)  
 Alberto Cortez (Argentina)

***Eros of Stage and Screen Thanatos***

**A walk in the media jungle**  
**Trauma drama**

217

**A land fit for misfits**

**Hard lines me ol' matey... Mala suerte, Che...**

223

*EastEnders/Barrio del Este* (2006)

BBC Television (United Kingdom)

***Animot liberation/La liberación animot* (1982)**

225

Steve Bell's *If ...* and *Humor* (Dystopia)

*Welcome Home/Bienvenidos a casa* (1983)

230

Tony Marchant (England)

*Gurka/Gurkha* (1988)

236

Vicente Zito Lema (Argentina)

*With the Gurkhas in the Falklands: A War Journal* (2003)

246

Mike Seear (England)

**From agit prop to docudrama via Brecht and Berkoff**

*Sink the Belgrano!/Hundan el Belgrano!* (1986)

255

Steven Berkoff (England)

*For Queen and Country/Por la reina y por la patria* (1988)

261

Martin Stellman/Trix Worrell (England/Saint Lucia)

*Iluminados por el fuego/Enlightened by Fire* (2004)

269

Tristán Bauer (Argentina)

<b>Lost innocence</b>	
<i>Woundings/Heridas</i> (1986)	285
Jeff Noon (England)	
<i>La deuda interna/Verónico Cruz</i> (1987)	294
Miguel Pereira (Argentina)	
<i>Fuckland/Fucklands</i> (2000)	297
José Luis Marqués (Argentina)	
<i>Penguins Stopped Play: Eleven Village Cricketers Take On the World/</i>	
<i>Los pingüinos pararon el partido: Once jugadores de cricket contra</i>	
<i>el mundo</i> (2006)	304
Harry Thompson (England)	
<i>The Straits/El Estrecho</i> (2003)	307
Gregory Burke (Scotland)	

## Epic Logos

<b>On not going transcendental</b>	
<i>El dolmen/The Dolmen</i> (1999)	323
Federico Andahazi (Argentina)	
<i>Islas Malvinas/Islas Malvinas</i> (1999)	332
Frank Lentricchia (USA)	

## Conclusion

<b>Comparative literatures in conflict: Chronicles of a debt forestalled</b>	339
<b>Bibliography</b>	357
<b>Index</b>	364

## Preface

This book addresses the fiction, poetry and song, drama and film that have dealt with the Falklands-Malvinas conflict, from the United Kingdom, Argentina and elsewhere, including France, Italy, Ireland, the United States and Brazil, over the last quarter of a century. In 2002, the British, Argentine and other press, radio and television produced a predictable stream of memoirs, political assessments and analyses of the contemporary and subsequent coverage and histories of the 1982 conflict and, in 2005, Sir Lawrence Freedman published *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign*, claiming that the conflict stands out as the last war of a past imperial era and as the first of the post cold-war era.

It is my contention that there is still a gap to be filled in consideration of the conflict and its aftermath. While there have been first-rate cultural analyses published in Argentina and the United Kingdom, such as Lucrecia Escudero's *Malvinas: el Gran Relato* and *Media Truth: Fiction and Rumors in War News in the Malvinas-Falklands Conflict* (1996), David Monaghan's *The Falklands War: Myth and Countermyth* (1998), and Kevin Foster's *Fighting Fictions: War, Narrative and National Identity* (1999), there has been no book devoted exclusively to comparative literary and other artistic representations of a key formative event not only in late twentieth-century international relations but also in the discourses of post-colonialism and cultural politics, be it in a post-Galtieri, post-Thatcher, United Nations, or other perspectives; whence a monograph on fictional accounts and exploitations of, allusions to, and extrapolations from, the Falklands-Malvinas factor.

As a specialist in comparative literary studies, I have assembled a rich archive of such creative works, on which virtually nothing has been written, and have sought to approach the topic not only with a comprehensive knowledge of Latin American and European literatures but also as a critic familiar with writing in Spanish, Portuguese, French and Italian, as well as in English. Though I engage with the discourses of history and politics, my method reflects my established practice as an analyst of literature and the cinema. I make no secret of my intention to court a broad readership, given the ever controversial nature of the subjects evoked by my projected title and, no less, by the remarkably varied creative, but almost never translated, output from so-called high-brow through political and satirical to punk and subsequent popular cultures. The challenge has been to achieve accessibility without diminishing the literary critical edge.

The book is structured according to a calculated division of narrative fictional, poetry and song, and stage and screen treatments of what I argue is the unfinished business of a war that still provokes reaction, and

at every level of society, whether in hard political debate over the Thatcher years, analysis of the ‘Dirty War’ and Argentina’s thirty thousand ‘disappeared’ victims of totalitarian military governments, or the inherited political problems of their economically embattled successors. The necessary seriousness of any writing on war does not diminish the need to inform, to engage and to entertain a broad spectrum of readers. Unless otherwise indicated, all the translations are mine. I have on occasion taken risks in departing from merely literal renderings in order to contextualize or even to popularize where meanings from another or other cultures would have remained otherwise obscure or inaccessible.

The audience will be not only, for example, specialists in war and war literature – not least in that constituency always alert to matters military or concerning the Thatcher and Galtieri effects – or in cultural politics, or in Latin American studies, but also those readers curious to explore the ever topical legacy of the Falklands-Malvinas conflict on both sides of the Atlantic, and beyond.

# **Introduction**

## Dubbing cultures

So while in many respects this conflict still stands out as the last war of a past imperial era, in others it can now be recognised as the first of the post cold-war era.

‘Envoi’, Sir Lawrence Freedman

‘Envoi’, finale of *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign*, is the force tasked by Sir Lawrence Freedman to sign off his monumental two-volume study, published in 2005, of the Falklands or Malvinas conflict of 1982. In resorting to a power traditionally invoked by the troubadour to sign off his poem, in the hope that his efforts might bring some further if unspecified benefit, the distinguished historian graciously doffs the cap to literature, doubtless in the knowledge that the imaginary is habitually the royal road of access to truths more lastingly captured in the inexorable slippage of fact into fiction, and long after official versions are collecting the exhaustion and dust of public neglect.

In Argentina and in the United Kingdom, over the last quarter of a century, cultural historians and literary critics have occasionally addressed and sought to account for the impact of the conflict on the creative imaginative and artistic output, of their respective cultures. Habitually, however, and with a few notable exceptions, they have done so in isolation or, at best, with cursory cross-referencing to ‘the other side’. My purpose is to look beyond national frontiers and to consider not just the so-called Falklands-Malvinas factor in politics but the conflict’s effect, its multiple effects, in literature and the arts worldwide. For, whilst not overlooking the literatures of Argentina and Britain, indeed using them as a point of departure and of continuing reference, I have also wished to explore the breadth and the international resonance in literary and other creative representations of this last of the traditional wars, as the conflict has been dubbed.

Dubbing cultures is itself an effect, and the works analysed here will often have been through a problematic process of translation, either literally, from one language to another, or through some other form of cultural transference. Perhaps even before the end of hostilities, on 14 June 1982, a foundational novel of war, Rodolfo Enrique Fogwill’s *Los pichiciegos/The Armadillos*,<sup>1</sup> was being written in Argentina, and an untitled, seminally problematic, poem by Jorge Luis Borges was published in August in the Buenos Aires-based national newspaper

<sup>1</sup> ‘11-17 June 1982’ is the date that ends the narrative. The novel was published in December 1983.

*Clarín* and, shortly thereafter, in *The Times* of London.<sup>2</sup> A plethora of fiction, poetry and drama soon ensued but was by no means restricted to writers from the countries involved in the fighting. Predictably, critical analysis of the literature arising from the conflict has tended to concentrate on the cultural output of one or other of the adversaries. Yet, whether from France, Italy, Brazil or the United States, for instance, or from deeply problematic spaces in-between, such as various Celtic and Anglo-Argentine perspectives, writers and artists have continued to draw on a complex and, ostensibly, still ill-comprehended war not only in terms of political history or failed diplomacy, of conflicting ideologies or the sheer waste of lives and national resources, but also of other more markedly symbolic investments and imaginaries.

Although a near-quarter century has passed since the war broke out, there continues to be a fascinated or perplexed return to its impact, consequences and effects. In recent years, and even as I write, witness the impact of Tristán Bauer's multiply prize-winning film *Iluminados por el fuego/Enlightened by Fire*, arresting works of fiction, poetry and drama, cartoon, painting, sculpture and cinema have drawn on the Falklands-Malvinas memory bank. Yet what is being remembered? Facts, dates, history? Or myths, mists, mystery? No definitive answer is available, let alone sought. Strong images remain, however, and continue to be projected, a reminder that it is habitually representations of war and conflict that matter; that make a difference. Whether expressed in histories, documentaries, political satires, protest songs, or narrative fictions, poems and dramas, war has been a foundational literary act of societies. In exploring how literatures perform not only as the effect of social causes but also as the cause of social effects, this book will address both the indelibly nineteen-eighties Thatcher and Galtieri factors inseparably from the present, continually crucial, questions of how Argentina represents the conflict to itself, or how England, by no means inseparably from Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, looks at itself and its cultural war or wars.

To revisit the literary texts of war may foster an understanding of other predicaments, other needs, and different cultures. It must be stressed therefore that the use of the materials chosen for analysis here is focused on dual publication, in English and in Spanish, with a view to familiarizing readers from the one tradition with ideas and images often well known or taken for granted by the other. Thus, for example, a British social imaginary suffused for more than two decades with the penguins

<sup>2</sup> The poem has come to be known as 'Juan López y John Ward'. It appeared in *Clarín* on 26 August and, as 'Juan López and John Ward', translated by Rodolfo Terragno, in *The Times* on 18 September 1982.

and politicians of Steve Bell's *Guardian* cartoons might seek and even find its Argentine counterpart in the exterminated bravery of the censored and eventually shut down satirical review *Humor* or the subversive bite of the newspaper *Página/12*.<sup>3</sup> It is more difficult to conceive of relevant equivalence in the dominant metaphors of respective societies concerned to identify the nation-state with a warship, a hospital, or the white headscarves of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo; with Trafalgared sea-ventures of a yestercentury or the Iron-Lady handbags of yesteryear. For when it comes to metaphors there can be no universals, no smooth transitions, only translations, transversals, re-representations and risks.

In bringing to the fore literatures of and in conflict, or in examining other writings, readings, and perspectives on what has already been convincingly characterized as a notoriously mythologized affair,<sup>4</sup> this study will explore perspectives from countries other than Argentina and the United Kingdom. It will also introduce angles developed by popular culture, or in minority and curiosity texts deriving from within the protagonists' national and literary imaginaries, from Sue Townsend's disingenuously corrosive *The Growing Pains of Adrian Mole*, of 1984, the José Luis Marqués *Dogme 95*-inspired feature film *Fuckland*, of 2000, to an ideologically saturated BBC TV soap-opera *EastEnders* episode of late-2005. Building on the invaluable research and persuasive arguments of such as, especially, Kevin Foster and David Monaghan in the one tradition and, in the other, the early yet indispensable critical pointers of Martín Kohan, Oscar Blanco and Adriana Imperatore, I have endeavoured to introduce, alongside analysis of established literary treatments of and engagements with the conflict, some less well-known or unpublished materials with a view to dissemination on both sides of the Atlantic and beyond. I have thus attempted to supplement what has usually been, primarily, either a 'Falklands' or a 'Malvinas' critical focus by adopting an international comparative and pluri-lingual approach to the topic. Not without risk, however. Inconceivable is the notion that any author writes from a non-skewed location; for danger lurks not merely in the brute partisan.

From where do I write? Certainly, in a professional context, from the standpoint of a critic specializing in Latin American literatures; and as one disinclined to worry unduly over the hotly-debated distinction drawn

<sup>3</sup> See Eduardo Blaustein and Martín Zubieta, *Decíamos ayer. La prensa argentina bajo el Proceso* (1998); and Horacio González 'The Journalist as the People's Detective', in Gabriela Nouzeilles and Graciela Montaldo, *The Argentina Reader History, Culture, Politics* (2002). The volumes are landmarks in the scholarship of memoir.

<sup>4</sup> Notably by Kevin Foster in his seminal 1999 analysis *Fighting Fictions: War, Narrative and National Identity*.

between literary and cultural studies. For what literary analysis is not, already and always, a cultural analysis, too? Not least in this book. Since 1982, especially in Argentina, and in the UK, France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Brazil, and the United States, I have been asked to address creative imaginative representations of the conflict. First, I found poetry, which led, in 1998, to the short monograph, *Poesia de Guerra*.<sup>5</sup> Then followed consideration of other genres. In assessing the artistic heritage of the war, I have chosen certain seminal early texts for close analysis, prior to showing how abiding themes, patterns, tropes and preoccupations are still being taken up, often in a broader spectrum of political and psychological treatments of the nineteen eighties and their aftermath. Thus, works by Jorge Luis Borges, Rodolfo Enrique Fogwill, Pierre Boulle, Jeff Noon, Richard Francis, Tony Conran, and Susana Thénon are selected, initially, not exclusively because they wrote foundational literature on the conflict. I have avoided revisiting in extended analysis – though I shall refer to where relevant – texts such as those, for instance, of Ian McEwan, Rodrigo Fresán or Daniel Guebel that have already been dealt with substantially by other writers on the literature of the war.<sup>6</sup>

Another factor in the selection was the desire to bring to light, in some cases back to the surface (because there is much out-of-print, unpublished, or unavailable work), literary and visual representations of the conflict and its protagonists or myths, including the unconventional, the marginal, the idiosyncratic, the controversial, the odd and even the mawkish. For, as with any war, the literary responses to the 1982 conflict have been of very uneven quality.

In an early assessment of ‘Cultural Rebirth’ in Argentina, *The Land that Lost Its Heroes: The Falklands The Post-War and Alfonsín*, Jimmy Burns offered in 1986 indispensable insights into both the literature of the reconstruction period and a contemporary assessment of it:

<sup>5</sup> No accent is missing. It was in Portuguese-speaking Brazil, and arising from the vibrant debates and literary culture of the São Paulo Memorial de América Latina, inspired by Marina Heck, that *Poesia de Guerra* emerged.

<sup>6</sup> I refer primarily to the perspicacious Foster, Monaghan and Nigel Leigh, or Kohan, Blanco and Imperatore and, more recently, Beatriz Sarlo, Julio Schwartzman, Adrián Marcelo Melo and Marcelo Sergio Raffín. Various, they discuss such as *The Falklands Factor* by Don Shaw and Colin Bucksey, *The Ploughman’s Lunch* by Ian McEwan and Richard Eyre, *Arrivederci Millwall*, by Nick Perry, *Tumbledown* by Charles Wood and Richard Eyre, *Resurrected* by Martin Allen and Paul Greengrass, *La causa justa* by Osvaldo Lamborghini, *A sus plantas rendido un león* by Osvaldo Soriano, ‘El aprendiz de brujo’ and ‘Soberanía nacional’ in *Historia argentina* by Rodrigo Fresán, ‘Memorandum Almazán’ in *Nadar de noche* by Juan Forn, *Kelper* by Raúl Vieytes, or ‘Impresiones de un natural nacionalista’ in *El ser querido* by Daniel Guebel.

In democracy's first book fair each stand was like a chapter of a history book – it too forming part of the collective catharsis [...] In July 1986 [Daniel] Divinsky was forced to admit the limitations of the cultural renaissance. 'There is as yet hardly any first-class fiction that deals with events during the *proceso* [...] Nobody like a Grass or Solzhenitsyn has appeared... the events are still too close. Reality is too hard' (Burns, 1986, 151).

Ten years after the encounter, James Aulich brought together a number of specialist writers on media, film, cartoon and the novel in the retrospective *Framing the Falklands War: Nationhood, Culture and Identity*. The insights of that still resonant study are crucial for any student of representations of the war, and the challenges that it raised, primarily from a British perspective, might still be posed to critics in the United Kingdom, Argentina, or anywhere else. In the chapter 'A Limited Engagement: Falklands Fiction and the English Novel', Nigel Leigh could assert: 'the Falklands War has not, so far, permeated the consciousness of Britain's most prominent writers [...] although this is not to say that we will not see in the next twenty years or so the emergence of a Falklands [...] narrative image that corresponds to the known and ascertainable facts about the historical situation [...] For the moment, the lacuna continues to speak louder than words' (Leigh, 1992, 126-7).<sup>7</sup> I believe that Leigh's caution and, in particular, his prescience may now invite readers to re-appraise not only the English novel but also, internationally, all the genres of literary and artistic representation of the war and its aftermath.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Readers interested in the sub-genre of 'Combat Fiction' will find in his 1992 essay a quick-fire guide to the mini-spate of popular novels in which 'Argies' are the stereotyped fodder of predictable 'Brit' up-and-at 'em action cum victory. Leigh writes more generously of Walter Winward's *Rainbow Warriors* (1985) and Alexander Fullerton's *Special Deliverance* (1987) as, at least, attempting to 'accommodate both sides' to 'humanise the enemy' (120-21). In the former, the tired device of school-friends finding themselves on opposing sides is supplemented by a love-interest between the Argentine and his adversary's sister. The deaths of each of their brothers, binarily neat as is the rest of the plot, only prefigures the death – more slowly – of their own engagement. It peters out over drinks (a bathetic echo of her brother's name, Peter Ballantine). The trope would find its Argentine counterpart in the film *Fuckland*, without notably greater subtlety but with a less formulaic narrative structure and a far more experimental plot.

<sup>8</sup> This challenge, indeed, has already been taken up by Laura Linda Williams in her notably comprehensive PhD thesis *Malvinas Myths, Falklands Fictions. Cultural Responses to War from Both Sides of the Atlantic*. The Williams dissertation was completed in 2005. Her meticulous and insight-laden analysis of 'ten central' 'British and Argentinean texts' explores the adversaries' nationalist myths in the light of the theories of Roland Barthes and Hayden White, respectively, on 'myth as a constructed

I have deemed it time to re-assess, to show evidence of, and to demonstrate by close textual analysis the quality of much of the writing to have dealt with the war, both in its early aftermath and since, be it in English, Spanish or other languages, whether by authors relatively well known in their respective cultures or beyond, such as Colm Tóibín, Charlie Feiling, Erri De Luca, Tim Binding, Néstor Perlongher, Jeff Noon, Steven Berkoff, Gregory Burke, Federico Andahazi, Frank Lentricchia, or by lesser known, often no less accomplished, writers and artists. My chosen division of the enticing range of treatments of the 1982 conflict has been dictated by a perceived need to order abundant and diverse materials, however provisionally, and broadly respecting both chronology and genre characteristics, thereby to draw, too, on the substantial international corpus of critical writing on the ever shifting literary and artistic representations of war.

Not the least of my considerations in structuring the book as I have was the imperative to entertain the reader whilst dealing cautiously with the often harrowing content of the works under review. Thus the division into four parts, 'Fictions of Exhaustion', 'Lyrics in Conflict', '*Eros of Stage and Screen Thanatos*', and 'Epic Logos', is both strategic and provisional, allowing me the opportunity to situate the different genres within broader contexts of the characteristics of the literature of war from other eras and other zones of conflict. I shall not anticipate the judgments that I leave for the conclusion of this book in respect of which of the works analysed, foundational, subsequent or late, have convinced me of their power to make sense of the war or, a quarter century after the fact, of their success in filling a perceived gap in the literature of that unfinished business called the Falklands-Malvinas conflict.

Preferring to resist paraphrase, I have included relatively long quotations from the literature in order to bring to merited attention much that is otherwise unknown, unread because in another language, or simply forgotten.<sup>9</sup> The present book does not seek either comprehensively to review the many works of creative literature arising from the war or to address personal memoirs, factual histories or journalists' reporting of the 1982 conflict and its effects.<sup>10</sup> Not least of the imperatives of writing

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and superimposed signification' and on the shared plot structures of history and literature (Williams, 2005, v).

<sup>9</sup> So abundant and rich were the materials that I discovered in one genre that I devote a second book to them, whence the forthcoming *It Breaks Two to Tangle: Political Cartoons of the Falklands-Malvinas Conflict*.

<sup>10</sup> I do break my own rule on occasion by touching on the writing of the arch exponent in English of the Falklands memoir, Private Ken Lukowiak, for the obvious reason of its consummate literariness and relevance to the creative imaginative genres that are my proper concern. Similarly, I had no hesitation in exploiting the literary sensibility of Major Mike Seear in the chapter dealing with the Gurkhas.

selectively, and out of personal choice, on the imaginative literatures, the narratives, poetry, theatre and cinema of war is the ethical need to concentrate on the analysis of fiction – for that is what literature is – and to resist the lure to corroborate through recourse to fact.

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## Index

### A

Abel, 172-5, 192, 206  
Adorno, Theodor, 260, 354  
Affonso Romano de Sant'Anna, 21, 206, 209  
Allende, Salvador, 187  
Amundsen, Roald, 196  
Andahazi, Federico, 8, 22, 29, 201, 243, 323, 325-6, 330-1, 341, 350, 354, 357  
Andrew, Prince, 20, 40, 145-6  
*animot*, 21-2, 32-5, 47, 172, 196, 225, 229, 275, 279, 300, 339  
Ares, Daniel, 243  
Astiz, Alfredo, 29  
Aulich, James, 7, 225, 228, 268, 341, 357, 360, 363  
Austrian TV, 248

### B

Baily, Ken, 270  
Bakhtin, Mikhail, 68, 76, 357  
Ballard, J. G., 21  
Ballestrino de Cariaga, Esther, 65  
Balsa, General Martín 344  
Barnes, Julian, 15  
Barrenechea, Ana María, i, 333  
Barrio Norte, 66, 74, 163-5  
Barth, John, 107-8  
Barthes, Roland, 8, 71, 84, 249  
Bataille, Georges, 67-8, 79, 357  
Baudelaire, Charles, 206, 209  
Bauer, Tristán, 4, 21, 224, 260, 268-9, 273, 344, 353  
Bauhaus, 206, 208  
BBC, 5, 21, 120, 163-4, 168-9, 218, 223, 229, 249, 255, 264, 304, 341, 359-62  
Beckett, Samuel, 108  
*Belgrano*, 15, 21, 39, 86, 91, 115, 120, 197, 218, 255-9, 295, 312, 323, 346, 353, 357  
Bell, Steve, 5, 21, 34-5, 41, 123, 167, 196, 225, 229, 265, 285, 318, 335, 359  
Bemberg, María Luisa, 24

Bentham, Jeremy, 135, 227  
Bergonzi, Bernard, 204  
Berkoff, Steven, 8, 218, 255  
Bertolucci, Bernardo, 206  
Bicheno, Hugh, 125  
Bienale, 206, 208  
Biggs, Ronald, 223  
Bignone, Reynaldo Benito, 228  
Billington, Michael, 255  
Binding, Tim, 8, 19, 52, 113-15, 118-38, 154, 201, 243, 249, 358  
Blanco, Oscar, ii, 5, 16  
Blaustein, Eduardo, 5, 14, 225  
Blimp, Colonel, 115  
Bluff Cove, 182  
Bollig, Benjamin, 201  
boom-novel, 129  
Borges, Jorge Luis, 3, 6, 20-21, 29, 108, 129, 152, 177, 193, 333, 340, 357  
Bouille, Pierre, 6, 19, 22, 35, 39-48, 118, 123, 169, 171, 358  
Bragg, Billy, 20, 152, 165-7, 358  
Bramley, Vincent, 119, 126  
Breton, André, 96, 113, 176, 358  
Brien, Alan, 153  
Briski, Norman, 236  
Bucksey, Colin, 218  
Buenos Aires, i, 4, 13-14, 20, 22, 36, 63, 65-9, 71, 73-4, 76-8, 82-5, 130-31, 134-7, 144, 163, 165-6, 172, 174, 179, 181, 190, 236, 248-9, 251, 261, 269, 272, 297, 300, 304, 333, 340, 357-63  
Burke, Gregory, 8, 22, 35, 288, 307, 318, 352, 358  
Burns, Jimmy, 6-7, 22, 31-2, 72, 99, 113, 219, 236, 358

### C

Cain, 173-5, 192, 206  
Callaghan, James, 169  
*camorra*, 94, 101  
Camus, Albert, 64  
*Canberra*, 113-14, 117-18, 121, 125  
Canclini, Néstor García, 343  
Caparrós, Martín, 243

Carrington, Lord, 55, 218  
 Casares, Bioy, 83  
*Catch-22*, 37, 130, 271  
 Cervantes, Miguel de Saavedra, 174  
 Chesterton, G. K., 29, 83, 174  
 Chile, 95, 135, 137, 297, 299  
 Churchill, Winston, 82, 149, 181,  
 286, 340-41  
 Cimino, Michael, 37  
*Clarín*, 4, 13-4, 172, 332, 340, 358,  
 363  
 Cohen, Leonard, 160  
 Cohen, Stanley, 76  
 Columbus, Christopher, 179  
 Connick, Denzil, 272  
 Conrad, Joseph, 172-4  
 Conran, Tony, 6, 21, 58, 155, 182-6,  
 193, 265, 362  
 Contursi, Pascual, 199  
 Cortázar, Julio, 135, 346  
 Cortez, Alberto, 21, 152, 209  
 Costello, Elvis, 20, 152, 168  
 Cox, James, 255  
 Coyote, 131  
 Croft, Cesca M., 162

## D

Darío, Rubén, 29, 177-8, 182, 206  
 Davie, Donald, 194  
 Day-Lewis, Daniel, 262  
 De Luca, Erri, 8, 19, 35, 70, 94-113,  
 142, 341, 358  
 Delich, Francisco, 243  
*Delirium Teatro*, 236, 243, 245  
*delirium tremens*, 244  
 Demaria, Cristina, i, 23, 78-9, 358,  
 361  
 Dependence, 241  
 Derrida, Jacques, 22, 33, 46-7, 85,  
 204, 229, 275, 331, 355, 359, 361  
*desaparecido*, 23  
 Di Stefano, Alfredo, 99, 113  
 Díaz del Castillo, Bernal, 181  
 Dickens, Charles, 29, 48, 336  
 Divinsky, Daniel, 7  
 Dodds, Klaus, 35, 225  
 Dogme 95, 5, 297  
 Domon, Alice, 29

Dostoevsky, Fyodor, 21-3, 359  
 Duffy, Carol Ann, 21, 194, 198, 352  
*dulce et decorum est*, 175  
 Duquet, Léonie, 29, 65

## E

*EastEnders*, 5, 21, 223-4, 265  
 Eco, Umberto, 13, 99, 113, 217, 249,  
 285, 363  
 Edinburgh, H. R. H. The Duke of, 40  
 ego, 68, 80, 106, 156, 204  
 Ellroy, James, 83  
 Empire, 21, 30, 51, 72, 86, 118, 121,  
 144-6, 167, 182, 188, 191, 249,  
 263, 333-4  
*Endurance*, 87  
 Enfield, Harry, 261  
 Eros, 8, 21, 213, 217, 290, 303, 352  
 Escudero, Lucrecia, i, iii, 15  
 Essex Man, 165, 318  
*Evita*, 270  
 Exocets, 86, 176  
 Eyre, Richard, 218, 263

## F

Featherstone, Simon, 149, 176, 193-  
 4, 198-9, 204, 355, 359  
 Feiling, C. E., 8, 17, 19, 68, 70, 72,  
 76, 81-92, 126, 131, 138, 142, 243,  
 270, 273, 275, 341, 351, 359  
 Ferguson, Niall, 343  
 Fleming, Ian, 131  
 Flynn, Errol, 251  
 Fogwill, Rodolfo Enrique, 3, 6, 17-  
 19, 21-39, 47, 81-2, 85, 131, 138,  
 142, 167, 201, 220, 243-4, 276,  
 285, 307, 341-4, 350-51, 359  
 football, 25, 158, 169, 278, 304, 310,  
 347, 353  
 Formby, George, 172  
*fort-da*, 79, 101, 242  
 Foster, Kevin, iii, 5-6, 54, 120, 201-  
 02, 218-19, 225, 263, 341, 359  
 Foucault, Michel, 119, 135, 227, 359  
 Francis, Richard, 6, 19, 35, 48, 53,  
 286  
 Frears, Stephen, 262, 264

Freedman, Sir Lawrence, iii, 3, 88,  
116, 153, 155, 247, 252  
Fresán, Rodrigo, 6, 22, 83, 243, 344  
Freud, Sigmund, 80, 131, 133  
Frye, Northrop, 32  
Fussell, Paul, 156, 194, 198, 202,  
204, 355, 359

## G

Galtieri, Leopoldo, iii, 4, 27, 39, 72,  
116, 177, 188, 227-8, 247-8, 270,  
305, 335, 342  
Gamerro, Carlos, 19, 29, 129-30,  
133-4, 136, 138, 201, 334, 359  
Gang of Four, 20, 167-68, 229, 360  
García, Charly, 20, 152, 163-5, 193  
Gardel, Carlos, 199, 206  
Gavshon, Arthur, 257  
*General Belgrano*,  
ghost, 65, 161, 204, 308, 335  
Gibraltar, 117, 288, 307-11, 315,  
318, 352, 358  
Gieco, León, 280, 350  
Glasgow Celtic, 158  
Glasgow Rangers, 158  
Godwin, Peter, 14  
Goldenberg, Jorge, 236  
Golding, William, 21, 29, 307  
'Gotcha!', 15, 197  
Gramsci, Antonio, 193  
'Gran Relato', 67  
Greengrass, Paul, 6, 268, 341  
Guber, Rosana, 272  
Guebel, Daniel, 6, 83  
Guevara, Nacha, 236  
Guinness, Alec, 52  
'Gunga Din', 251  
Gurevich, Luis, 280  
Gurkhas, i, 9, 21, 28-9, 31, 42-5, 149,  
165, 217, 236-52, 270-71, 278,  
342, 362

## H

Hall, Stuart, 193, 262  
Hammett, Dashiell, 83  
Hands, Jeremy, 119, 361  
Hansard, 259

Harrier, 26, 35, 37, 271, 277, 325-6,  
342  
Hastings, Max, i, 54, 66, 336  
Heaney, Seamus, 149  
hearing voices, 237, 240  
Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, 269  
Heller, Joseph, 37  
Henderson, Hamish, 188  
Hiroshima, 135  
Holbling, Walter, 15  
Horatius, 226-8, 281  
Housman, A. E., 91-2, 360  
*Humor*, 5, 21, 220, 225-7

## I

id, 68, 79-80, 106, 204, 358, 363  
Imperatore, Adriana, 5, 16  
International Monetary Fund, 294  
*intra-colonialism*, 177, 182  
Irigaray, Luce, 100, 113  
Iron Lady, 5, 53, 172, 181, 188, 261  
*Isolario* (Island Book), 285  
Italian immigrants, 95

## J

Jack Tar, 228  
James, P. D., 83  
Jarry, Alfred, 256  
Jenkins, Simon, 169, 341  
Jeunet, Jean-Pierre, 271  
Johnson, Samuel, 57, 122  
Joseph, Keith, 48

## K

Kael, Pauline, 54  
Kafka, Franz, 108  
Kamín, Bebe, 138, 219-20, 263  
kelpers, 14, 57, 158, 298, 300  
King's Cross Station, 127  
Kipling, Rudyard, 166-7, 229, 249  
Kirschner, Néstor, 281, 353  
Kohan, Martín, 5, 16, 344  
Kon, Daniel, 211, 219-20, 263, 294  
Kramer, Stanley, 54  
Kristeva, Julia, 68, 76, 78, 301, 360  
Krog, Antjie, 331  
Kureishi, Hanif, 262-4

Kusturica, Emir, 23

## L

*l'hommelette*, 107

*La Grande Illusion*, 176

Lacan, Jacques, 101

Lady Di, 200, 361

Lami Dozo, Basilio, 72, 228

Langley, Bob, 39

Lawrence, John, 225

Lawrence, Robert, 225, 263, 360

Lawson, Mark, 340

Le Coq, Jaques, 259

Lee, Tom, 348

Leguizamón, Esteban, 224, 270, 275

Leigh, Nigel, 6-7, 15-17, 39, 109,  
339, 341, 360

Lejeune, Philippe, 74

Lema Zito, Vicente, 29, 160, 165,  
217, 236-52, 273, 352

Lentricchia, Frank, 8, 22, 332-6, 354,  
361

Leone, Sergio, 55

Lerner, Alejandro, 20, 147

Liceo Naval, 83, 88

Linklater, Magnus, 255

Littlewood, Joan, 117

Lodge, David, 53

Love, James, 20, 157, 160-61

Lowden, Graeme, 162

Lukowiak, Ken, 9, 20, 100, 113, 120-  
22, 152, 193, 265, 288-9, 345

## M

Macdonald, Ian, 175

MacDougall, Charles, 218

Mackenzie, Compton, 117

*mafia*, 94

Mallarmé, Stéphane, 332, 336

Maradona, Diego Armando, 278,  
306, 353

Marchant, Tony, 21, 217, 230

Marlowe, Christopher, 91

Marques, José Luis, 5, 22, 138, 297,  
302

Marx, Karl, 85, 355, 360-61

Massera, Emilio Eduardo, 228

McEwan, Ian, 6, 122, 218

McGowan, Robert, 119

McKenzie, Kelvin, 198

McTell, Ralph, 267

Melo, Adrián Marcelo, 6, 243

Melville, Herman, 40, 335-36

memoir, 5, 9, 84-5, 94, 103, 121,  
148, 153, 246-47, 260, 263, 268-9,  
280-81, 288, 304, 350

Menem, Carlos, 70, 78, 80, 133

mental health, 237, 361

Merry, Bruce, 15

Middle East, 318, 353

Millet, Kate, 90

Milton, John, 348, 360

Mole, Adrian, 114, 196

Monaghan, David, iii, 5-6, 122, 218,  
225, 255-6, 263, 341, 361

Montaldo, Graciela, 5, 88, 199-200,  
225, 273-5

Montanari, Federico, 246

Moreiras, Alberto, 354

Morlocks, 309

Morpurgo, Michael, 346-8

*Mother Courage*, 255, 288, 362

mourning, 127, 204, 212, 275, 281,  
355

Mrs T, 52, 267

Müller, Agueda, 143

*My Beautiful Laundrette*, 262-4

## N

Naipaul, V. S., 66, 165

nationalism, 181, 196, 204, 241, 294,  
299, 345

Neruda, Pablo, 187

Newbolt, Sir Henry, 249

Nietzsche, Friedrich, 131

Noon, Jeff, 6, 8, 22, 167, 217, 285

Nott, John, 175, 225, 247, 256, 317

Nouzeilles, Gabriela, 5, 88, 199-200,  
225, 273-5

## O

*Obediencia Debida*, 81, 331

*Oh! What a Lovely War*, 124

One-Nation, 231

*Otherankestrasse*, 290

Owen, Wilfred, 101, 113, 149-52,  
175-6, 186, 192-3

## P

*Página 12*, 5  
Parkinson, Cecil, 48  
Patagonia, 14, 94, 186  
Pedroni, José, 143  
penguins, 22, 185, 229, 299-300,  
304, 358, 361-3  
Pereira, Miguel, 22, 294-6, 361  
Perlongher, Néstor, 8, 21, 200-06,  
358-61  
Perón, Juan Domingo, 294  
Peronism, 68, 84, 88  
Perry, Nick, 6, 218  
Pessoa, Fernando, 81, 191-3, 205  
*picana*, 76, 198  
Piglia, Ricardo, 129  
Plaza de Mayo, 5, 65, 75, 187, 212,  
245, 270  
Ponce, María, 65  
Port Pleasant, 184-5  
Premio Goya, 224  
Price, Nigel, 20, 149, 152  
PTSD, i, 20, 88, 160-62, 235, 248  
Puerto Madero, 131, 134, 138  
Puig, Manuel, 29, 85  
Punto Final, 280, 331  
Python, Monty, 40

## Q

'¡Que se vayan todos!', 164  
Quiroga, Horacio, 29, 33

## R

Raban, Jonathan, 341  
Raffi, Marcelo Sergio, 243  
Rama, Ángel, 135  
Reagan, Ronald, 219  
reconstruction of the past, 240  
'Rejoice!', 279  
*Revista Tal Cual*, 15  
Rhodes, Bernie, 164  
Ricardou, Jean, 77, 126, 362  
Rice, Desmond, 257  
Rimbaud, Arthur, 191

'Rule Britannia', 113, 288

## S

Said, Edward, 57, 340  
Santucho, Mario Roberto, 27  
Sarlo, Beatriz, 6, 26, 228-9, 244, 354  
Sassoon, Siegfried, 122  
Schaper, Rüdiger, 255  
Scots Guards, 155-6, 277  
Scott, Captain R. F., 196  
Séchan, Renaud, 20, 47, 152, 169,  
171, 193  
Seear, Mike, i, 9, 21, 37, 149, 155-6,  
160, 247, 251, 270, 362  
Shaw, Don, 218  
*Sheffield*, 82, 121, 198, 311-12, 315,  
353  
Sherman, Alfred, 48  
Silkin, Jon, 186, 361  
Simon and Garfunkel, 161  
Sinatra, Frank, 198  
*Sir Galahad*, 182, 185, 187, 358  
*Sir Tristram*, 182  
Sitwell, Edith, 86  
Soriano, Osvaldo, 243  
South Atlantic, 13, 32, 39, 44, 48-54,  
71, 88, 101, 117, 146-7, 162, 164,  
176-7, 180, 186, 218, 225, 272,  
285, 287, 307, 312, 315, 342, 352,  
357  
*South Pacific*, 287  
*Spitting Image*, 261  
St Malo, 176  
Stellman, Martin, 21, 260-263  
Stewart, Rod, 113  
Strummer, Joe, 164  
subjectivity, 99, 100, 105, 113  
Sun-tzu, 356  
superego, 68, 106  
Superman, 133

## T

Tamerlán, Fausto, 131  
Task Force, 13, 39, 72, 114-17, 120,  
145, 155-6, 171, 180, 182, 188,  
196, 262, 278, 311, 342  
Tebbit, Norman, 165, 225, 264, 267,  
306

Terence, 206, 209  
Terragno, Rodolfo, 4, 173, 174  
Thanatos, 8, 21, 103, 217, 242, 303,  
316, 352  
Thanatos-Eros, 242, 316  
Thatcher, Margaret, iii, 4, 14-15, 39,  
44, 48, 55, 64-5, 69, 74, 82-3, 122,  
130, 149, 168-72, 175, 177-83,  
218, 225-7, 248-9, 255, 260-61,  
264, 270, 279, 285, 289, 300, 309,  
335-6, 339-42, 362  
'The Bad Sex Award', 131  
The Clash, 163-4  
The Fat Controller, 131  
*The If Chronicles*, 228, 281  
The Last Night of the Proms, 113  
*The Sun*, 15, 180, 197-8, 223, 248  
'The Unknown Soldier', 175, 191  
The Village People, 298  
Thénon, Susana, 6, 21, 39, 86, 177,  
180, 182, 193, 198-9, 206, 301,  
334, 352  
Tinker, David, 148-9, 160, 164  
Tóibín, Colm, 8, 19, 34, 63-81, 85,  
89, 126, 142, 165, 243, 341, 351-2,  
362-3  
Townsend, Sue, 5, 115, 196  
Trier, Lars von, 297  
*Tunes of Glory*, 124  
Tweedie, Jill, 153  
Twin Towers, 131

## U

Underwood, Lieutenant-Colonel  
Martin, RLC (RAOC), 155  
Union Jack, 64, 116, 125, 225, 232,  
270  
United Nations, iii, 178, 247-8  
Urban, Stuart, 218

## V

Valéry, Paul, 141  
Valle-Inclán, Ramón del, 259

Verne, Jules, 40  
Videla, Jorge Rafael, 27, 228  
Vietnam, 15, 37, 190, 339-40, 360  
Vinterberg, Thomas, 297

Voltaire, François-Marie Arouet de,  
40

## W

Washington, Denzel, 263-5  
*Week of Modern Art*, 208  
Welles, Orson, 52  
Wells, H. G., 21, 24, 29, 307, 309  
Welsh Guards, 155, 182, 185  
Wilcox, Tim, 225  
Williams, Laura Linda, 7  
Williamson, Edwin, 129  
Winward, Walter, 7, 113, 119  
Wolf Tones, 144  
Wood, Charles, 218, 225, 263  
World Cup, 99, 113, 270, 294, 311  
Worrell, Trix, 21, 260-68, 362  
Wynne Thomas, M., 182

## X

Xenophon, 180

## Y

Yossarian, 271

## Z

Žižek, Slavoj, 136  
Zubieta, Martín, 5, 14, 225, 346, 358