

# RETREAT, A STORY OF 1918

Charles R. Benstead

New Introduction by Hugh Cecil

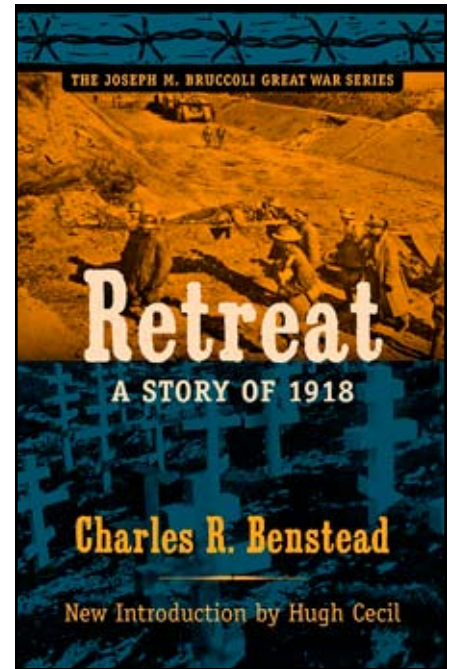
*Retreat, a Story of 1918* by Charles R. Benstead was first published in England in 1930, as the genre of Great War fiction was shifting from positive accounts of combat heroism toward narratives of disillusionment and loss. Benstead's novel spans both phases through its tragic portrayal of an army chaplain driven to madness when his orthodox values hold no sway against the bloody realities of war and through its heartening vision of how devotion to duty can fortify soldiers' sense of purpose and self-worth in the absence of spiritual faith.

*Retreat* is based on the author's combat experiences as a British Fifth Army artillery officer during the massive German advance in March 1918, adding historical depth to the literary value of the novel. The book centers heavily on the British retreat as experienced by Padre Warne, an egotistical churchman ill suited to the bitter realities of combat at the front. Warne shepherds a flock whose lack of interest in religion undermines his sense of significance to the war effort; and in the shadow of the overwhelming German army, he finds his faith gives way to fear, rendering him useless and removing even his personal significance to the soldiers. Juxtaposed against Warne is Captain Cheyne, a battle-fatigued soldier who maintains his courage in the face of insurmountable odds through an empowering sense of national duty. In this theater of battle, Benstead captures the cruel injustices of the war as he knew it and the inadequacies of religion to address the harsh circumstances on the front.

In the new introduction to this edition, war historian Hugh Cecil provides historical context for the novel's plot, a biography of its author, and a survey of the book's critical and controversial reception.

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**Charles R. Benstead** (1896–1980) served with distinction as an artillery officer in World War I and as a naval training officer in World War II. He wrote eleven other books, though none approached the critical and commercial success of *Retreat*.

**Hugh Cecil** is an honorary lecturer at the University of Leeds and cofounder of the Second World War Experience Centre in Leeds, United Kingdom. His numerous publications include *The Flower of Battle: How Britain Wrote the Great War* and *Facing Armageddon: The First World War Experienced*.

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