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Emmanuelle Danchin, *Le temps des ruines 1914-1921*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2015. 348 pp. Maps, tables, figures, bibliography. € 28 (pb). ISBN 978-2-7535-4192-4.

Review by Hugh Clout, University College London.

In this most impressive doctoral monograph, Emmanuelle Danchin provides a comprehensive and innovative analysis of how the ruined buildings that resulted from the events of World War I were represented by image and in text. Her focus is on the northern départements of France that experienced intense destruction, with brief additional reference being made to the war ruins of Belgium. A necessary distinction is drawn between “ruins” that decayed gently, were invaded by vegetation, and often acquired an aesthetic charm, and “war ruins” that resulted from acts of violence at specific moments in time. Madame Danchin begins her study with the events of August 1914, coinciding with the start of the Great War, and extends her work for three years beyond the Armistice of 11 November 1918 to embrace the phase when ruined buildings were patched up and temporary accommodation installed before permanent reconstruction commenced in 1921. Her approach is anchored firmly in the visual culture of the time, with its wide and diverse array of official and unofficial photographs, picture postcards, and films. By 1914, she declares, “la photographie est devenue accessible ou tout du moins familière à tous” and was considered to be “un fragment de vérité” (p. 22). Over the last quarter century, photographic collections have been catalogued in numerous archives in France and adjacent countries, making it possible to undertake detailed iconographic research that could not have been achieved in earlier times.

Organizing her work into three main parts, Emmanuelle Danchin begins by exploring how images of war ruins were made. At the very start of the conflict, photojournalists captured the impact of destruction for the pages of such periodicals as *L'Illustration*, *La Croix* and *Illustrated War News*. The bombardment of Reims cathedral was depicted very often, serving as “une sorte de modèle, qui ouvre la voie à d'autres accusations de crimes contre le patrimoine” at Arras, Soissons and numerous smaller settlements (p. 69). As the months passed, commercial companies started to produce picture postcards that employed the depiction of ruins to convey the horrors of war in “villes martyres” (p. 81). Sometimes, images were transformed by the addition of flames, smoke and, of course, colour to convey the desired effect, which could be enhanced by appropriately worded captions. Postcards produced by German firms apportioned blame for devastated landscapes in a very different way from their Allied counterparts, as did the pro-German *Gazette des Ardennes*, first published in October 1914 at Charleville. In 1915, the Ministère de la Guerre created both photographic and cinematographic sections with a view to making a picture archive of destruction, as questions started to be raised about what should be done with war ruins once peace was restored. Eventually, 108 albums were created, covering all parts of northern France but with an emphasis on areas where devastation was most intense. German agencies also assembled their own iconographies. Arguably, the first tourists to visit the battlefields were the soldiers themselves, who took their own pictures to show to family and friends back home as well as providing written accounts of what they saw. Questions were raised as to whether a selection of ruins should be conserved to attract tourists in future years in order to boost the economy of the *régions dévastées*.

Part two views war ruins as “l’incarnation de la nation [française] et de ses souffrances” (p. 123). Danchin identifies 1916 and 1917 as the time when ruins were not only used to represent the violence of war but also served as “comme élément fédérateur en France autour de la nation attaquée” (p. 125). In earlier years, emphasis had been placed on the devastation of religious and civic buildings, now images of ruined farms and factories were often taken and included in the popular press. Photographic exhibitions were mounted for the general public, being displayed not only in town halls and high schools throughout France but also in many European capitals and even in South American cities. Brief colour films showing devastation were shown as news items in many French cinemas. In 1916, banker Albert Kahn—founder of the Société Autour du Monde and of the Archives de la Planète—proposed to organize photographic expeditions in the northern départements and adjacent parts of Belgium to assist the Ministère de la Guerre in compiling its photographic record. Two specially trained cameramen travelled widely across the *régions dévastées* during the first nine months of 1917, but their photographs were never fully exploited by the Ministry, reposing in the archive of the Musée Albert Kahn. At this time, there was a veritable boom: “l’offre d’images explose. Elle répond à la demande d’une population avide de découvrir et de voir ce qui se passe sur le front” (p. 154). The photographs that resulted partially satisfied public curiosity and also served as a “prise de conscience [qui] renforce un peu plus la cohésion nationale et justifie la poursuite de la guerre” (p. 155). In 1917, the Commission des Vestiges et Souvenirs de Guerre was created, with inspectors compiling reports on the battlefields of Picardy. Ministers, senators, prefects and other dignitaries visited the war ruins and expressed sympathy for and solidarity with *sinistrés* sheltering nearby. At the same time, the Michelin tire company published its first battlefield guides for courageous citizens wishing to explore “safe” areas of northern France. Questions continued to be raised about the future of the war ruins. It became increasingly clear that to conserve a proportion of them was not a viable proposition, since the future lay with permanent reconstruction.

In part three, Danchin traces how the heroic ruins of earlier years were increasingly seen as hindrances to future restoration and recovery. Once the Armistice was signed, the devastated environments of northern France were inspected and their ruins systematically recorded with compensation and reparation in mind. Posters displayed cultural atrocities and apportioned blame. Loans started to be raised to assist recovery. New photographic collections were assembled and a remarkable film of the ruins of Arras, Soissons, Reims and surrounding areas was shot from an airship between August and October 1919. Ruined towns and villages were awarded honours, including the Légion d’Honneur and the Croix de Guerre, and some were “adopted” by towns in France or abroad whose residents raised funds for reconstruction. Tourists, or “pilgrims” as they were sometimes styled, visited battlefields and cemeteries, with guidebooks edited by railway companies joining the rapidly growing collection of Michelin volumes, which were also translated into English. Just a handful of war ruins were conserved in plans for reconstruction and only the most intensely fought-over battlefields (the red zone) were converted to state forest or military training grounds rather than being restored for farming. Nine villages to the north of Verdun were recognized as martyred settlements and were never rebuilt, but these were very much exceptions to the general rule. Photographs and films joined official and unofficial narratives as mnemonics for the horrors of wartime destruction. By 1921, photographers had other concerns as they captured new features in the landscape such as settlements and farmsteads undergoing reconstruction and the unveiling of ubiquitous *monuments aux morts*.

Emmanuelle Danchin has produced a meticulously researched and superbly illustrated examination of a theme that is often overlooked by military historians and by those exploring the restoration of settlements in times of peace. In addition to the 280 pages of her main text, the author provides a sixty-page guide to sources. This includes an extremely full bibliography, an excursion into national and local libraries and archives, and an introduction to the array of photographs, films and drawings held in repositories as varied as the Musée Albert Kahn in Paris, the Historial de la Grande Guerre at Péronne, the Service Historique de la Défense at Vincennes, and the Archives de la Médiathèque de l’Architecture et du Patrimoine at Montigny-les-Bretonneux. In addition, very valuable information is appended on images held in Belgian, British, German and even Austrian archives. Naturally, a complementary section identifies various

archives and libraries holding important literary narratives. The final pages of the monograph not only provide an essential support for the main body of text but also serve as a most valuable guide to orientate future researchers. Emmanuelle Danchin is to be congratulated for producing a truly excellent contribution to our understanding of this troubled period in French history. The publisher, too, deserves congratulation for producing this attractive book at a very reasonable price.

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