

Response Page

The following responses were posted on the H-France discussion list in response to Margaret Darrow's review of Raymond Jonas, *The Tragic Tale of Claire Ferchaud and the Great War*.

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The original review may be found on the H-France web page at:
<http://www.h-france.net/vol6reviews/Vol6no45darrow.pdf>

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I am grateful to Margaret Darrow for her thoughtful review of *The Tragic Tale of Claire Ferchaud and the Great War*, starting with her kind words (□magisterial study□) about its predecessor *France and the Cult of the Sacred Heart* (2000). Of such generous praise one can never get enough!

Many of her criticisms turn on the inherent risks of biography, namely, the risk of using a life as a vehicle for doing history. The record of any life, especially one as obscure as that of a shepherdess from the Vendée, has lacunae. But I was committed to a biographical approach from the very beginning because I was fascinated by how Claire's vocation "in fact, a desperate lunge to recover control of her life" turned against her. It also struck me as a particularly efficient and suggestive way to connect some dots linking the France of the Dreyfus Affair to that of Vichy.

At one point I wrote that the choice of a religious vocation was one of the few independent decisions that a woman in Claire's position might make. Who would dare to turn a woman from God? But having made that choice, Claire finds herself at its mercy, with tragic consequences. She has this meteoric rise as a wartime visionary, but then things get complicated. Her "handlers" become demanding and proprietary. Part of the church hierarchy in France turns against her, the Vatican is indifferent, if not hostile, while plans for her religious order come to a halt. Even lay interest in her spirituality and her visions fades with the war, as does any claim to celebrity status. She dies in obscurity, resigned to the idea that her role is not to save France, as she once imagined, but to suffer for it. That is tragic both in the everyday sense of "deeply sad" but also in the theatrical/literary sense of a heroic struggle culminating in defeat.

This gets to the "tale" part of the title and certain writerly issues. I decided to write the book as a tale, that is, as a story open to interpretation, rather than in the conventional scholarly mode of exposition, analysis, and conclusion. This meant that while I would rely on analytical categories (including gender) to *inform* my writing, I would never allow them to break the spell by

intruding on the story itself. I wrote *Tragic Tale* in a way that I thought suggested certain conclusions, but without leading the reader to a particular one. I imagined that this not only showed a degree of respect for the reader's good judgment, but also might make it a good book to read, think about, and discuss.

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Dear All:

As Professor Jonas knows from our correspondence, I used *The Tragic Tale* this past year for an upper division course on "Europe and the First World War." (I teach it as one of several inherited "war/death courses," though with an emphasis on the more exciting cultural history of warfare.) It was very well received overall by the students and it elicited a fair amount of vibrant discussion. For anyone considering a class on the Great War, I would give it a serious look, even among the flood of literature from the past decade. The price is reasonable for a paperback.

As a supplementary text, it nicely melded questions of gender, the civic nation, and religion for undergrads, who at least in central MN had enough familiarity with the ecclesiastical meanings of the Sacred Heart to follow it. The book was of a very appropriate length. Aspects of its biographical nature, such as its ending, aroused some good methodological debate. So although a few students missed (inevitably) the scent of cordite, for the range of gender and social interests of the class, it worked well. And it is written in a manner more accessible than the European-oriented syntheses, again for the American undergrads. It would go nicely as a book-end with the soldiers' memoirs that are now easily available (Junger et al.)

And I might add that Dr. Jonas was very willing even to take some questions from our students, second-hand, through correspondence. That, however, wouldn't come with the text...