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Matt Perry, *Memory of War in France, 1914-45. César Fauxbras, the Voice of the Lowly*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011. xi + 259 pp. Notes, bibliography and index. £60.00 (hbk). ISBN 978 0 230 59441 8.

Review by Angela Kershaw, University of Birmingham.

The aim of this book is the rediscovery of the life and works of César Fauxbras, a novelist, journalist and non-aligned leftist activist writing in France in the interwar period. Fauxbras' work, published and unpublished, is substantial and diverse, and Matt Perry's study certainly convinces the reader of the value and intrinsic interest of this virtually unknown figure. From this point of view, the book is thoroughly worthwhile and deserves a place alongside existing studies of leftist intellectuals—both well-known and obscure—of the period. Perry explains in the book's preface how he came across Fauxbras' work in the context of his research on unemployment in 1930s France and eventually gained access to Fauxbras' private papers and manuscripts via his grandson. Perry has had unprecedented access to these documents, with the result that the book is based on detailed primary research using previously unavailable material. Since publication, Editions Allia has brought out an edition of Fauxbras' *Sondage*, a survey of the opinions of his fellow prisoners of war transcribed during the summer of 1940, under the title *La Débâcle*.^[1] Perry has published extensively on French and British labour history, including his *Prisoners of Want: The Experience and Protest of the Unemployed in France, 1921-45* which is particularly relevant to his subsequent work on Fauxbras.^[2] Thanks to this extensive expertise, the study is well able to locate Fauxbras within the various social, historical and political contexts which determined his *oeuvre* and which, as a writer and occasional militant, he sought to influence.

The introduction sets out what little is known of Fauxbras' life. César Fauxbras—the pen name of Kléber Gaston Gabriel Alcide Sterckeman (1899-1968)—was a sailor in the French navy during the First World War. Following a brief period in the merchant navy after the war, he settled in Paris, married, and qualified as an accountant. Apart from a failed attempt to set up a bookshop in La Ciotat in 1931, Fauxbras worked in various accountancy jobs in Paris without managing to establish a stable career. Literary success came in 1935 when his third novel, *Viande à brûler: Journal d'un chômeur*, was nominated for the prix Goncourt. Although it did not win, the novel was critically acclaimed and widely reviewed. Fauxbras was mobilised in March 1940, captured on 28 May as his company was attempting to reach Dunkirk from Hazebrouck, and repatriated to France in the spring of 1941. Little is known of his post-war life. His POW interviews from 1940 and his war diary are the last known texts he wrote.

The book's title has a dual meaning, referring not only to the presence of the memory of the First World War in Fauxbras's novels, but also to the contribution his writings during the Second World War might make to French cultural memory of the later conflict. The book proceeds chronologically, and is divided into three parts. The first, "Great War at Sea," deals with Fauxbras' first two published novels: *Jean le Gouin: Journal d'un simple matelot de la Grande Guerre* (1932) and *Mer noire: Les mutineries racontées par un mutin* (1935), both originally published by Flammarion.^[3] These novels are based closely on Fauxbras's experiences in the navy during the First World War, and thus convey a particular experience of combat not addressed in comparable and better-known French war novels of the time such as Barbusse's *Le Feu* (1916) or Dorgelès' *Les Croix de bois* (1919).

The stories are told from the perspective of "the average sailor, or the archetypal Jack Tar" (p. 21), and Perry presents Fauxbras' project as one of contestation—these novels seek to challenge and correct existing versions of events, fictional or otherwise. *Jean le Gouin* centres on the sinking of the fictional *Robespierre*, a transposition of the actual sinking of the *Danton* on 19 March 1917, aboard which Fauxbras had served until May 1916 (p. 28). The sinking of the *Léon Gambetta* on April 27, 1915 also features in this novel (p. 31). *Mer noire* focuses on the Black Sea Mutiny of 1919 during the French intervention against the Bolshevik regime in Russia. The strength of these first two chapters

is Perry's account of the relationship between Fauxbras' novels and established 'official' accounts of the same events. Chapter one presents *Jean le Gouin* as a refutation of the writings of Paul Chack, Chief of the Historical Service of the French Navy and future Nazi collaborator, whilst chapter two presents *Mer noire* as a refutation of the PCF's mythologizing of the mutinies, notably in the work of André Marty. Fauxbras' novels are thus pressed into the service of micro-history, though as Perry acknowledges, "[i]t is too simplistic to counterpoint a false official account with the true subaltern memory" (p.34); Fauxbras's novels may present themselves as a more authentic 'truth,' but they of course remain partial, emanating from a particular point of view determined by the author's past experience and by his situation at the time of writing the novel.

Part two, "The Crisis of the 1930s," focuses on Fauxbras' third and fourth published novels and covers the themes of unemployment (*Viande à brûler*, 1935) and the Popular Front (*Antide: ou les Banqueroutes Frauduleuses*, 1937, and Fauxbras's political journalism). The discussion of *Viande à brûler* in chapter three perhaps risks overstating the text's exceptionality as a French novel about unemployment insofar as it chooses to locate it in relation to non-French texts such as Greenwood's *Love on the Dole*, Fallada's *Little Man*, *What Now?*, Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Whilst these are interesting comparisons, they jar a little in a study which proclaims no comparative remit. This chapter begs the question of how exactly from a literary perspective Fauxbras' work relates to the large swathe of French leftist-committed literature of the 1930s by authors such as Paul Nizan or Louis Aragon, and to the French proletarian 'school' and the novels of, say, Henry Poulaille, Eugène Dabit or Marguerite Audoux. This is not necessarily a criticism, but rather an avenue for future research: how might Fauxbras the novelist be read in relation to the complex and diverse theoretical and political debate over proletarian writing in 1930s France?[4]

Perry touches on this sort of question and indeed, in his earlier work, he mentions in passing other contemporary French novels and stories about unemployment, both well-known (Jules Romains, *Les Humbles*, 1933) and unknown (Guy Fogr , *Le Fils du chomeur*, 1934).[5] The discussion of *Antide* (chapter four) refers to Nizan and to Aragon (pp. 92-93, though it is Aragon's poem *Front rouge* rather than his novels that appears here) in the context of Fauxbras' satirical portrait of the *Association des  crivains et artistes r volutionnaires* (AEAR), but there is no sustained analysis of the relationship between Fauxbras' work and these authors' understanding and practice of French socialist realism. Henri Barbusse appears as the author of the archetypal First World War novel *Le Feu* and we learn that Fauxbras was "sponsored" by Barbusse (p. 62), but no mention is made of Barbusse's position on proletarian writing. Barbusse's journal *Monde* had run a survey on proletarian literature in 1928-1929, and, despite his communist allegiance, Barbusse maintained a stance against both the Soviet RAPP (Russian Association of Proletarian Writers) and the early dogmatism of the AEAR. Was Fauxbras' position close to that of Barbusse? Or should he rather be located in relation to Poulaille's less politicised concept of proletarian writing? The implication of Perry's presentation of Fauxbras is that he was non-aligned, both in literary and political terms; yet it would be interesting to understand in more detail the terms on which he rejected the various different literary-political orthodoxies of the French left of the period. Chapter five presents an engaging account of Fauxbras' journalism and also of his somewhat eclectic engagements in political action which gives a lively impression of the uses he made of irony and satire to convey his critique of both the right and the left.

The third part, "Defeat and Occupation," is for me much the strongest section of the study. Chapter six offers a convincing analysis of *Sondage*, the text in which Fauxbras attempted to capture the responses of French prisoners of war to the defeat. Perry demonstrates not only how this text can provide "an insight into the state of mind of the soldier" but also its capacity to "[demonstrate] the group dynamics from the inside" (p. 124). Perry addresses certain themes, such as defeatism and masculinity, which emerge from the document, as well as paying close attention to the "modes of communication" it exemplifies: "humour, personal narrative, argument and reported speech" (p. 129). This chapter is an effective discussion not only of the opinions which the document illustrates, but also of the concept of 'opinion' and its use by historians. Chapter seven analyses Fauxbras' (unpublished) Occupation journal. As Perry notes, "[p]roletarian diarists are rare" (p. 147) and it is

undeniable that this document is an extremely valuable source for this reason. Again, the focus is on Fauxbras' interest in 'opinion.' The discussion unpicks Fauxbras' account of popular resistance to Vichy propaganda and his account of "the psychological reception of events" (p.161). The epilogue draws together the strands of the analysis and poses the question of Fauxbras' political position under the Occupation in Paris as neither a collaborator nor a member of the Resistance.

It is in this third part that the pertinence of the methodology outlined in the introduction becomes clear. The concept of "consciousness," defined by Perry as "the arena in which norms which constitute culture are processed: being internalized, ignored or challenged" and as "the meeting place of culture and politics and consequently the true locus of agency and the motive force of intervention into the external world out there" (pp. 12-13), is used effectively in the analysis of *Sondage* and the diary, however its relevance to the literary texts was by no means clear to me and indeed it is mentioned only briefly in part one (e.g., p. 56) and disappears from view in part two. The concept of memory, also announced in the Introduction, is applied somewhat unevenly, and the book does not, perhaps could not engage in any substantial manner with what is now a vast and complex body of work on literature and memory studies. I wonder then if the use of "memory" in the book's title risks giving something of a hostage to fortune. But this is the challenge, and the danger, of interdisciplinary work. What is clear is that the author brings a substantial and longstanding expertise in labour history to the study of Fauxbras which is always illuminating and which, for me, is quite sufficient to make this book a valuable contribution to the history of France's traumatic passage through the interwar years and the Occupation which followed.

It is unfortunate that the book is marred by recurrent problems of presentation and expression, the most distracting of which is the use of the past tense in the accounts of the novels where the present would be more appropriate. It is possible that this is the result of editorial intervention, since traces of the present are visible, and thus some sections read very oddly: "On a second occasion, a policeman abruptly tells a man to put out his cigarette. Paul's friend Chouard turned to the former and said, 'Been through Verdun and having to take that humiliation'" (p. 64).

There are numerous examples of comma splices ("One source that eroded this was his family background, he was acutely conscious that his father, a surveyor, who had taught him to despise those on low incomes, would be ashamed of his son's descent." [p. 70]), and occasional cases of the present participle being used where an active verb is required ("The most poignant being a poster which depicted the cross of Lorraine as *bourrage* twisted as a screw into the skull." [p. 180]). There are many other errors of punctuation (such as missing commas) and syntax, as well as a number of spelling mistakes: "on route" for *en route* (p.125); "succeeded" for *seceded* (p. 142); "moral" for *morale* (pp.151, 152, 158); "Lybia" for *Libya* (pp. 158, 161). Since this is not a dominant feature of Perry's other published work, it would seem that the author has unfortunately been badly served by his editors or proofreaders.

NOTES

[1] César Fauxbras, *La Débâcle* (Paris: Allia, 2011).

[2] Matt Perry, *Prisoners of Want: The Experience and Protest of the Unemployed in France, 1921-45* (Ashgate, 2007).

[3] A new edition of *Jean Le Gouin* was published in 2004 (Louviers: Editions l'Ancre de la Marine); this is the edition cited in the text.

[4] Relevant sources include J. E. Flower, *Writers and Politics in Modern France* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977); Géraldi Leroy and Anne Roche, *Les Ecrivains et le front populaire* (Paris: Presses de la foundation nationale des sciences politiques, 1986); Pascal Ory, *La belle illusion. Culture et politique sous le signe du Front populaire* (Paris: Plon, 1994); Michel Ragon, *Histoire de la littérature prolétarienne de langue française* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1974, 1986); Nelly Wolf, *Le Peuple dans le roman français de Zola à Céline* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990); Rosemary Chapman, *Henry*

Poulaille and Proletarian Literature (Amsterdam : Rodopi, 1992); Jean-Pierre Morel, *Le Roman insupportable. L'Internationale littéraire et la France (1920-1932)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985).

[5] Matt Perry, *Prisoners of Want: The Experience and Protest of the Unemployed in France, 1921-45* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 33 n. 85.

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