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Gaston Sterckeman [César Fauxbras, pseud.]. *Le Théâtre de l'Occupation. Journal 1939-1944*, ed. Anthony Freestone. Paris: Éditions Allia, 2012. 223 pp. B&W photographs, biographical note, and index. 9.20€. (pb). ISBN 9-782844-854308.

Review by Lynne Taylor, University of Waterloo.

César Fauxbras, the nom-de-plume of Kléber Gaston Sterckeman, was a left-wing activist and writer of novels in the 1930s and early 1940s. A searing critic of all vestiges of authority and a strong defender of the *menu peuple*, Fauxbras used his novels and his role as a journalist constantly to challenge both the government and the political left wing when he believed they had betrayed either their principles or the ordinary citizen.

Born in 1899 and raised in the wake of the Franco-Prussian war, as a youth, Sterckeman was ironically a devoted patriot, seething with hatred for the Prussians. In defiance of his parents, he left school at the age of fifteen and joined the French navy as a *mousse* (a ship's or cabin boy), just a few months before the beginning of the First World War. He was sixteen when he signed up for ten years' service and, by 1918, he had reached the rank of *second maître de manoeuvre* (boatswain's mate). His experiences in the navy during the war would be the inspiration for his first novels, *Jean le Gouin* and *Mer Noire*.^[1] The experience of the war both destroyed his sense of patriotism and instilled in him a deep hatred of war and of the naval officer class. In 1920, he left the navy and joined the merchant marine where he stayed until 1924, in all likelihood smuggling alcohol to Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon during Prohibition. In June 1924, he married Marcelle Franck and moved to the Paris region, abandoning his life at sea. Within a few years, he had trained as an accountant.

Although he began writing while still in his teens and was writing seriously by the mid-1920s, it was not until 1935 that he was able to find a publisher for his first novels. He then took the pseudonym of César Fauxbras—a *faux bras* being the rope used to moor a ship. His first novels were immediately successful, and were quickly followed by a searing account of the lives of the unemployed during the economic crisis of the 1930s, *Viande à brûler (Journal d'un chômeur)*.^[2] He began his career as a journalist with that book. In 1936, he helped organize the first union of officers of the merchant marine, acting as its secretary general for a period of time. Through the late 1930s, Sterckeman's writing, both journalistic and fictional, became increasingly critical of the Popular Front government and, more generally, of the left-wing political parties in France. His next (and last published) book, *Antide ou les banqueroutes frauduleuses* was a reprise of Voltaire's *Candide* and a satire of the parties of the Popular Front. It marked his definitive break from the French Left.^[3]

In September 1939, Sterckeman was mobilised in the navy before being transferred to the army. The navy apparently was not interested in having such a vocal critic in its midst. He fell prisoner to the Germans on 29 May 1940 and spent almost a year in a prisoner-of-war camp in Austria—fodder for his next novel (never published), *Crever au Stalag*. Upon his release from the camp, he returned to Paris where he unsuccessfully tried to reconnect with the literary and syndicalist worlds. His work, considered too subversive, was deemed unpublishable during the period of the occupation. Meanwhile,

during that same period, Sterckeman remained in Paris and kept a diary in which he recorded his observations about daily life in Paris, about the war, and about the occupation.

Le Théâtre de l'Occupation, the work under review, is a carefully edited and annotated version of that occupation diary. As such, it provides a fascinating and insightful view onto the years 1939 to 1944, from the perspective of a keen and critical (often ironic) eye. Sterckeman's deep concern for the ordinary worker, his disdain for both the Germans and the Vichy regime, his frustration with the Left, all resonate in the themes lacing through his diary. As one might expect from a diary, the daily entries are short, sometimes cryptic since this diary was written as a personal record of the diarist's own musings and observations. It was not written for posterity, so background knowledge of French politics, French figures of note, and the war is assumed, and the shorthand used by Sterckeman can sometimes confuse. The annotations, which are plentiful, are useful to a certain degree, especially in clarifying the internecine politics of the inner circles of the Left at the time, but it is left to the reader to place the diary in the larger context of the war and occupation. This is not a serious defect, however, since to provide that context would make it an extraordinarily cumbersome "read," and take away from the work's brevity and intriguing charm, the sense of being plunged into Streckeman's occupied Paris. This and the necessarily haphazard nature of the writing (it reads rather like a stream of consciousness, a series of random observations, rather than having any kind of plotline), mean that this is a book that one explores slowly, and with care.

Streckeman clearly followed the literary world and its machinations. He fumed over the calibre of the work being published during the occupation, and especially about the work that won the Prix Renaudot in 1941. After reading a novel by Pierre Béarn, he swore never again to read a novel about war. However, the diary's real focus makes it clear that the plight of the working class (both in terms of the mass unemployment and the injustices of the *relève* and STO), the exigencies of daily life under the occupation (especially the rising prices on the black market, as well as the shortages of food and fuel—which he tracks throughout the diary), the politics of the Vichy regime, and of course, the progress of the war, were his chief concerns.

Streckeman obsessively read a variety of newspapers and journals, fretted when they were not available, and listened intently to the *radio anglaise* (Radio London), as well as to Radio Paris, the German propaganda machine. His diary, then, was also an ongoing exercise in political triangulation, as he parsed the news from his various sources, comparing accounts of events in an effort to understand what really happened. It is fascinating to read the unfolding account of the war in the USSR as seen through his eyes, given the limited information with which he had to work. This exercise in triangulation is a powerful demonstration of what must have been a common phenomenon in a situation where information was sparse and unreliable, but keenly sought. Every snippet of information was savored, considered, mulled over. Rumors abounded and rumors dominated in this environment.

He noted, as well, the increasing harshness of the regime—the increasing persecution of the Jews, leading to Vel d'Hiv, the curfews, the increasingly regular execution of hostages in retaliation for sabotage or other acts of resistance, the execution of Communists and others arrested for resistance. Interestingly, other than when discussing Radio Paris, the Germans did not figure very prominently in his diary. Instead, his focus, his acidity and his ire was reserved for the Vichy regime (and especially those of the Left who joined its ranks), and he tracked the byzantine politics of its upper echelons closely and acerbically.

Written for himself, the diary was the one place Streckeman could express himself freely, and he did so often. The problems in French society and politics about which he railed in his novels and journalism, as well as his sympathies for the downtrodden, were at the core of his concerns during the occupation years. In this diary, then, we get a revealing insight into the mind of a man with a keen intellect and a strong sense of injustice. What we also see, however (notwithstanding the assertion in the biographical

note that, by this time, Streckeman was no longer a patriot), is a man who was still deeply concerned about and for France—not the France of Daladier, Pétain, Laval or Darlan (for whom he had nothing but disdain), but the France of the *menu peuple*, those who, according to Fauxbrax, grew increasingly restive under the German and Vichy yoke.

NOTES

[1] *Jean le Gouin: journal d'un simple matelot de la grande guerre* (Paris: Flammarion, 1935); *Mer Noire: les mutineries racontées* (Paris: Flammarion, 1935).

[2] *Viande à brûler (Journal d'un chômeur)* (Paris: Flammarion, 1935).

[3] *Antide ou Les banqueroutes frauduleuses: roman peut-être philosophique* (Paris: Flammarion, 1938).

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