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Marilyn Shevin-Coetzee and Frans Coetzee, eds., *Commitment and Sacrifice. Personal Diaries from the Great War*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. ix + 321pp. Bibliography, internet resources, acknowledgements, and index. \$34.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN: 9780199336074.

Review by Lisa M. Todd, University of New Brunswick.

Marilyn Shevin-Coetzee and Frans Coetzee's new compilation of personal diaries from the First World War comes amidst the flood of works published in tandem with the centenary of that conflict. With the intent of adding "new and distinctive voices to the chorus of testimony regarding life during the Great War" (p. 6), the editors aim to present a more "intimate" history, which privileges the personal perspectives of mass violence. This welcome historiographical development has produced scholarship that forces us to reconsider the inner workings of this first "total" war, and the resultant shifting boundaries between: combatant/non-combatant, home/front, men/women, young/old, rural/urban, privileged/underprivileged—the list grows longer each year.

Shevin-Coetzee and Coetzee are not new to this enterprise. Indeed, their last document reader, *Empires, Soldiers, and Citizens: A World War I Sourcebook* provided a wide-ranging and multi-faceted view of a world at war.<sup>[1]</sup> While that book featured shorter excerpts from varied authors, the present volume intentionally privileges depth over breadth (the entries range from thirty-three to sixty-nine pages), allowing readers to trace individual lives over months and years, with each entry introduced by densely researched introductions. The diaries reveal the wartime lives of six men. John French was stationed in northern France with the British Army. His diary provides an intriguing look at the extraordinarily tense job of sappers, men who, as they tunneled under the trenches of the Western front, lived in constant fear of explosion, being buried alive, or being discovered by their German counterparts who were so close they could hear their conversations. Hence, most of French's war experience took place underground. As he writes in one entry: "Been working in a sap today with the Germans working right underneath us. You could even hear them throwing sandbags. We had to work very quietly and in very bad air, but we managed to get it in the required distance by driving a rabbit-hole, which is a sap about two and a half feet high and two feet wide. They are going to charge it on the next shift. The air got so bad before we finished that a candle would not burn" (p. 42).

Philip T. Cate, a Harvard student, volunteered with the American Field Service as an ambulance driver in the Vosges mountain region of Alsace. In this heavily contested area, young male recruits from Ivy League schools were placed under the command of the French Army, giving them an opportunity to perform crucial medical actions, while witnessing the hardships suffered by local civilian populations. Willy Wolff was a twenty-four-year-old Jewish-German man imprisoned in the Knockaloe Aliens Camp on the Isle of Man, as a result of the alien Registration Act of August 1914, which saw the internment of all Germans and Austrians between the ages of seventeen and forty-two. Wolff's diary spans nearly four years and describes the fraught status of internees who inhabited a grey area between combatant and non-combatant. Indeed, as Wolff writes, "In every instance, the English officials forget they are dealing with civilians" (p. 115).

New Zealander James Douglas Hutchinson fought with the ANZAC artillery at Gallipoli. His observations veer between depictions of battle and moral judgments of the communities he encountered while on furlough. While Henri Desagneaux was an infantry officer in the French Army, he recorded the sympathy he felt for the refugees he encountered: "There are families of seven, eight children walking along the road. An old man supported by a neighbour: he was a refugee in 1870 and is one again in 1914. A young mother pushing a pram in which her months old baby is crying. It brings tears to your eyes" (p. 227). *Commitment and Sacrifice's* final chapter is the diary of Felix Kaufmann, a Jewish-German machine-gunner held as a prisoner-of-war in France. Captured in April 1917, after two-and-a-half years of fighting, Kaufmann's entries remind the reader of the brutal conditions of forced labour, hunger, and deprivation under which many POWs suffered, despite international conventions to the contrary. As a whole, the six chapters present poignant entries mixed with the ordinariness of the "everyday"—an often jarring combination that provides evidence for the editors' assertion that diary-writing provided psychological benefits to their wartime authors as it allowed many to order their thoughts, seek consolation, vent anger, frustration, and fear, and ultimately, to "preserve some sense of remaining a literate human being under circumstances all too inhuman" (p. 5).

The volume's introduction nicely contextualizes the scholarly benefits of private diaries as historical sources. The editors maintain that wartime diaries tend to be more intimate than letters, as they were not meant for an audience, they are more expansive in description because they escaped postal censorship, and they maintain a "raw immediacy" that even memoirs cannot convey to the twenty-first century reader (p. 5). The editors identify five themes running through the entries. The war, they claim, was an "educator" of young men, but they also stress the dehumanizing nature of modern conflict (p. 6). The diaries highlight the daily determination and endurance necessary in modern soldiering, but also that young men needed recreational outlets. Finally, the entries give glimpses of battle motivation. While some soldiers were propelled to kill by their heightened antagonism toward the enemy, others were compelled by their sense of duty to cause.

The diaries make riveting reading and will appeal to myriad audiences. Readers of battlefield experience will appreciate Desagneaux's self-aware accounts of extreme violence: "What don't they invent these days to kill each other with!" (p. 220); "There's blood everywhere; the wounded have sought refuge with us, thinking that we could help them; the blood flows, the heat is atrocious, the corpses stink, the flies buzz—it's enough to drive one mad. Two men of the 24<sup>th</sup> Company commit suicide" (p. 235). Other entries describe his widespread fascination with new technologies; diarists record the wonder of watching aircraft and Zeppelins. Historians will find ample evidence of the "hurry up and wait" phenomenon of modern soldiering; many entries describe boredom, monotony, and frequent leisure time. That authors such as John French could frequently lament their lack of news about the very war in which they were fighting ["Have not seen a paper for several days.... Got a notion to write home and ask them how the War is getting on" (p. 36)] may be jarring to a young readership connected by the Twittersphere.

Scholars of race and globalization will read with interest descriptions of encounters between peoples. Doug Hutchinson details racial tensions in the streets of Cairo: "Hear great stories about Maoris. An English Tommy called one a black bastard and was knocked through a plate glass window" (p. 191). In Colombo he writes, "the natives dress in a sort of running singlet above (or sometimes stripped to the waist) and a gaily coloured skirt below. It is very hard to tell the men from the women. They are a dark brown colour, which looks a sort of dark green when the sun shines in it" (p. 187). Felix Kaufmann details his interactions with "Arabs," and claims to be able to "write a book about the French morbid hatred of the Germans and their use of the word 'Boche'..." (p. 294). Historians of sexuality will note occasional mentions of prostitution in the diary entries and gender historians will find ample material on the workings of masculinity. Historians of medicine and humanitarianism will note interesting details in Philip Cate's descriptions of ambulatory services, while those working on prisoners-of-war and

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civilian internees will appreciate insights into the forced labour, humiliation, monotony, and hunger which too often characterized imprisonment of multiple populations.

The richness of these sources does not entirely compensate for the relatively narrow perspective of the volume. Especially in light of the editors' previous work, it is disappointing that the collection continues the outdated tradition of focusing largely on the Western Front and solely on men. In all, though, scholars and students seeking new insights into the daily, "intimate" lives of men in the First World War will find much of interest in this volume.

#### NOTE

[1] Shevin-Coetzee and Coetzee, eds., *Empires, Soldiers, and Citizens: A World War I Sourcebook*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

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