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Albert Jean Michel Rocca, *Œuvres. Mémoires sur la guerre des Français en Espagne (1814). La Campagne de Walcheren (1817). Le Mal du pays (1817-1818, inédit)*. Ed. Stéphanie Genand. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2017. 294 pp. €32. ISBN 978-2-7453-4742-8

Review by Thomas Dodman, Columbia University.

“Qui est Albert Jean Michel Rocca?” (p. 7). Readers may well be asking themselves this question, posed in the preface to the volume under review from the venerable academic publisher Honoré Champion. Those most likely to recognize the name are literary scholars, specifically specialists of Germaine de Staël, for Rocca—“John” to family and friends—is best known as the novelist’s second husband. Twenty-two years her junior, Rocca married de Staël in 1816, having begun a clandestine relationship with the flamboyant femme de lettres five years earlier, upon being demobilized from the French army. The couple had an illegitimate child who was kept secret from the world until their premature deaths, hers in 1817, his the following year, having barely turned thirty years old. The only people privy to the couple’s secretive liaison were the companions and admirers of de Staël who flocked to her Swiss compound on Lake Geneva, where she had been exiled by Napoleon Bonaparte. Deprived of a literary pedigree, considerably younger than Sand’s peers, and crippled by a battle wound to his left leg, Rocca cut a humble figure alongside the various Constants, Sismondis, and Lord Byrons that formed the so-called “Coppet circle” around de Staël. And this seems to be how posterity has remembered him, so much so that Jean Tulard’s standard bibliography of Napoleonic-era memoirs laconically remarks about Rocca’s work: “Memoirs about the war in Spain by themorganatic husband of Mme de Staël.”[1] But who was John Rocca, besides being Monsieur de Staël?

As Stéphanie Genand (president of the *Société des études staëliennes* and editor of this volume) puts it in her valuable introduction, this publication’s wager is that Rocca was also an author in his own right. This claim may be pushing things a little. Even allowing for the interesting question of the couple’s collaboration on Rocca’s wartime memoirs—in which, it seems, de Staël took a keen interest, seeking to capture with the pen those sensations that her sex forbade her from experiencing with the sword—comparisons to Céline’s Bardamu seem a little far-fetched. There are countless Romantic topoi typical of the time in these pages, but little else of literary interest. Not quite an author, then, but neither a mere husband, Rocca comes most into focus as a soldier, a profession he embraced at age 19, when he left his hometown of Geneva and volunteered to join Napoleon’s armies. He participated in two major campaigns, first as a foot soldier and then as a lieutenant in the Second regiment of hussars. In Prussia in 1807, Rocca fought pitched battles and witnessed Napoleon at his zenith; in Spain the following year, he became embroiled in the dirty guerrilla warfare that came to define the emperor’s “Spanish ulcer.” Surely, he was one of

the first to grasp that herein lay the two forms of warfare that would become characteristic of the modern epoch: ever larger battles fought by national armies fed on mass conscription, and irregular “small wars” fought by partisans and “insurgents” against foreign occupiers. A contemporary of Clausewitz, Rocca clearly perceived that these were two sides of the same coin, two forms of “national” or “people’s wars.” His detailed description of the latter, irregular variant makes him all the more interesting to twenty-first-century readers. For as the young Rocca came to realize—better than countless generals and politicians since—the Spanish taught the French that a fiercely patriotic and independent people would never bow to foreign oppression, no matter how powerful. In this respect, he may be seen as a progenitor of the voluminous literature on guerrillas and counter-insurgency that became central to Western military thought in the age of Empire. [2]

Rocca’s *Mémoires sur la guerre des Français en Espagne* offers a lucid and critical assessment of a murderous and ill-advised occupation. This was “an unjust war without glory” (p. 175), in which Rocca admits to acting against his better judgment and convictions. He describes in equal measure the horrors visited by each side on the other, balancing French “terror” (p. 132) (pillaging and reprisals against innocent civilians) with graphic descriptions of mutilations inflicted by “partisans” (p. 130) on French soldiers caught off-guard. Like many of his contemporaries, de Staël included, Rocca views Spaniards as an insular, backward people trapped in religious beliefs and lacking in Enlightenment. He repeatedly Orientalizes them, drawing parallels with Arab “fanaticism” (p. 142) and resistance against the French invader in Egypt. Yet Rocca never questions the motivational value of Spanish “religious patriotism” (p. 86), nor the righteousness of their “national hatred” (p. 130) for the French. In describing Spanish women seen mutilating French corpses with scissors, he writes of their “justified fury against those who invaded their country” (p. 152). Unlike countless other memoirs of the Napoleonic wars (most of which were written long after the fact), Rocca thus brings the reader “face to face” [3] with battle or, more specifically, with military occupation. For the real value of his memoirs lies in this double displacement: from the bird’s-eye viewpoint of the general to the embattled perspective of the soldier; and from the glory days of the battlefield to the far less glamorous realities of “pacifying” occupation. Rocca’s is a quasi-ethnographic account of the daily life of French soldiers in the quintessential military quagmire. Readers get a vivid feel for the sheer unpreparedness and constant improvisation of the French army; its hopeless reliance on local guides and intermediaries disavowed by their own people; chaotic scenes of billeting late at night in recalcitrant towns; and the anxiety and resignation of men worn down by psychological warfare (music played all night around their strongholds), relieved only by smoking and by the inevitable inurement to the suffering of others. Without seeking to justify the atrocities he witnessed and was a part of, Rocca candidly shows how these emerge from what war—and particularly such a “dirty,” asymmetrical war animated by patriotic *jusqu’au-boutisme* on both sides—can do to ordinary people.

La Campagne de Walcheren is a much more conventional narrative of the little-known campaign against a British attempt to open up a new front in the Netherlands in 1809, and will be of interest primarily to military specialists. On the other hand, the previously unpublished novella *Le Mal du pays* continues in the experiential vein of the *Mémoires*, offering a penetrating analysis of the psychology of the Napoleonic junior officer. The title of this thinly veiled autobiography alludes to contemporary medical literature on homesickness or “nostalgia,” believed to be a dangerous psycho-somatic disorder typically found in the army. The story’s hero is an archetypal nostalgic victim: a melancholic Swiss volunteer who wastes away in a foreign land while longing for home,

eventually succumbing to tuberculosis.[4] This is, more or less, the story of Rocca's life, or at least the way in which he decided to emplot his premature death once he realized that he would not outlive Germaine de Staël for very long (the two died a mere six months apart). A somewhat maladroit portrait of youthful mal du siècle, *Le Mal du pays*, precedes by two decades Alfred de Musset's account of the same in *Confessions d'un enfant du siècle*. The two works also share an account of a frustrated young *littérateur* romantically engaged with an older, better established female writer, in Musset's case George Sand. Rocca's bouts of melancholy, tragic love, and suicidal thoughts are equaled in their pathos by Romantic descriptions of mountain scenes, where sublime nature and pastoral trimmings (including the inevitable reference to the *ranz des vaches*) overlap, echoing a then ubiquitous *littérature alpestre*. Most of all, the novella speaks to the epoch's fascination for war, whether as a patriotic duty of free citizens, or as a form of "intoxication" (p. 251) eagerly cultivated by restless young Romantics seeking to escape a desultory bourgeois existence and overpowering paternal figures.[5] Rocca beautifully captures the travails of a generation caught between thirst for adventure and fear of wartime brutalization. Like so many others, Rocca found the realities of military life--the discipline, drills, chores, violence, and unheroic truths--profoundly alienating. But it was, once again, peacetime occupation that turned out to be most disturbing, whether by the idleness that it imposed upon him as an officer forced to move from one billeting home to another and to seek distraction, in vain, in Berlin's nightlife, or by the arbitrary fiat that it inflicted on the local population. In a series of vignettes from Prussia following the peace of Tilsit in 1807, Rocca describes the legal travails, financial woes, and sexual violence endured by those civilians with whom he comes to interact as a sympathetic invader. His careful portrayal of the complicated but sometimes meaningful relations established between occupier and occupied foreshadows themes more typically associated with twentieth-century wartime literature (one inevitably thinks of Jean Bruller's masterful *Le Silence de la mer*). This was, Rocca submits, a "paix dévorante" (p. 254) that ate away at both sides. In his case, it precipitated the despondency and homesickness that ultimately got him back home on a medical discharge, in time to patch up relations with his estranged father, but not to cure the respiratory illness that slowly consumed him from within.

NOTES

[1] Jean Tulard, *Nouvelle bibliographie critique des mémoires sur l'époque napoléonienne écrits ou traduits en Français* (Geneva: Droz, 1991), 255.

[2] Starting with Charles Callwell's classic *Small Wars: Their Principle and Practice* (London: HM Stationary Office, 1986). It is worth pointing out that another contemporary of Rocca's also stationed in Spain at the time was Thomas Robert Bugeaud, who would go on to perfect merciless counter-insurgency tactics during the colonization of Algeria in the 1840s.

[3] To paraphrase John Keegan's seminal *The Face of Battle* (London: Penguin, 1983).

[4] See Thomas Dodman, *What Nostalgia Was: War, Empire, and the Time of a Deadly Emotion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

[5] On the latter, see especially Hervé Mazurel, *Vertiges de la guerre. Byron, les philhellènes et le mirage grec* (Paris: Les Belles lettres, 2013).

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