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**Emmanuel de Waresquiel**, *Lettres d'un lion: Correspondance inédite du général Mouton, comte de Lobau (1812-1815)*. Paris: Nouveau Monde/Fondation Napoléon, 2005. 206 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and chronology. €25.00 (pb). ISBN 2-84736-088-3.

Review by David P. Jordan, University of Illinois at Chicago.

Personal letters are the most fragile historical documents. Not as ephemeral as conversation, yet their survival depends on contingency and they are sent into the world to run the risks of ineptitude, time, weather, indifference, and for the Napoleonic period almost incessant war. The letters of General Georges Mouton, made the comte de Lobau by Napoleon, and here published for the first time, slumbered in the family archives of Lobau's descendants for more than a century until found by Emmanuel de Waresquiel, whose mother was the great granddaughter of Lobau's youngest daughter, Adolphine. There are approximately 150 letters and personal notes, the first sent to his wife from Niort, on February 19, 1812, and the last from captivity at Ashburton, in England, on August 3, 1815. They fall into three series: the Russian campaign of 1812; the Saxon campaign of 1813 (including the Battle of Nations, and Mouton's elevation to count); and Waterloo and Lobau's captivity. Waresquiel, who wrote a recent good biography of Talleyrand, has edited the letters discreetly, leaving intact most of Lobau's wayward spelling and other marks of hasty composition and a limited education, and providing helpful notes and compressed but adequate and accurate introductions to the three campaigns.

Lobau's young wife, Félicité d'Arberg, who married the count, thanks to Napoleon's interference—he controlled the marriages of his inner circle, carefully splicing his new aristocracy onto the roots of old families—when she was nineteen, belonged to an illustrious German family. As these letters make clear, despite an official, arranged marriage, the match was a loving one. Félicité, whom Lobau always called “Cité”, seems to have considered these love letters of a sort and so carefully preserved them. The other piece of good luck for posterity is that because Lobau was one of Napoleon's aides-de-camp he was entitled to use the reliable *estafette* service established by the Emperor in 1805. These privileged letters were faster and more carefully handled because they were stamped “Ministère de la Guerre, secrétairerie d'État.” Another set of personal letters—and the two sets are unique—those of General Bertrand to Fanny Dillon, were similarly sent. [1]

To the historian, greedy for personal details about the great events of the Napoleonic years from a witness so close to Napoleon, Lobau's letters are disappointing. His forty-two letters written during the Russian campaign, for example, are practically without detail. But there are a handful of observations that are precious. On September 16, 1812, just after Napoleon entered Moscow, the fire (begun the night before) enveloped the city. Napoleon, about to leave Moscow to escape the inferno, remarked to Lobau from the terrace of the Kremlin: “this augurs the greatest misfortunes for us” (p. 39). There is a regular reiteration of the Emperor's health, (see pp. 62, 66, 73, and 75 for representative examples) which Waresquiel speculates is for the censors who might read Lobau's mail. These assurances also served to calm the anxieties of his wife, for Napoleon was still thought invincible when he crossed the Nieman, and his good health would assure success. Now and then these formulaic phrases are followed with some concrete physical observation. Lobau noticed, as did many, that Napoleon was plump when the campaign began and put on more weight as it went on. When there is mention of the war, Lobau is optimistic and exaggerates French achievements: “We continue to have success, and today we learned that the duc de Reggio [Marshal Oudinot] has completely beaten an enemy force and taken fourteen pieces of artillery, three thousand prisoners, and destroyed about 5,000 men, counting both dead and

wounded" (p. 72). In fact, Waresquiel points out, Oudinot had only partial success. Nowhere in these letters is there any mention of the catastrophe Napoleon suffered in Russia or of the enormous psychological drain on a commander and an army looking to confront the enemy in a single, decisive battle. The ghastly daily scenes of horses dying in the heat, wagons stuck up to their axles in sand or mud, fever and diarrhea depleting the army, the lack of water on the march to Moscow, followed by the excruciating cold on the retreat, with starving men drinking the blood and hacking off the meat of still living horses, and the regular sight of men frozen to death in a sitting position before a dead fire, are not in Mouton's letters. The Battle of Borodino is not described, nor is the heroic crossing of the Berezina.

The same pattern of disregarding public details is in the later letters dating from the 1813 campaigns and Waterloo. There is a touching anecdote about Napoleon visiting the mortally wounded Marshal Duroc, although the last words of the dying man seem too theatrical: "My dear Duroc," said Napoleon, bathing his hands with his tears, "we must part, but we will reunite in another life." Napoleon sobbed. "Sire", the grand marshal said to him, "leave, leave me, to spare yourself too much sadness" (p. 128). During the Hundred Days, Lobau complains about Saint-Cyr, who "is the most false and the most morose military man one could encounter, although he has a great many talents" (p. 163). Otherwise, this rough and quiet man is a poor historical witness, and since he left no memoirs, diaries, or recollections his military reputation rests on the testimony of others, especially his aide-de-camp, Castellane. [2]

But if we have precious few historical details, we do have abundant testimony of a man deeply in love with and lonely for his wife. We have an attractive and decent man who performed even the most odious of military services out of duty if without enthusiasm. He was, for example, twice a jailer, an unwelcome assignment for any soldier. In May 1799 he guarded Pius VI, and in April 1808 he had charge of Charles IV of Spain. Both prisoners found Lobau a considerate and humane jailer. He saw himself as a soldier—he had joined the revolutionary armies as a young man and risen in the ranks—and the narrow definition of a soldier's virtue as the honor that comes of doing one's duty was enough for him. Lobau had quite imprecise ideas about God and appears more of a Deist than a formal Christian, but his faith was sincere. God is mentioned only a few times in these letters, but with a simplicity that breathed conviction and integrity. "God will help me and I will be patient," he writes, "above all when I am certain that I have been able to please His Majesty and to merit some sign of his favor. Otherwise this life would be too difficult" (p. 17). And more pointedly: "We will travel through the night," he writes his wife, on our way to Mayence [this is the last leg of the retreat from Moscow], "where we will probably arrive very late tomorrow. The will of God is in all things" (p. 47).

Lobau's was not an exalted soul. He was a man of this world with a simple, useful, piety and a good head for business, a formidable field general who inspired his men, and a man who kept his humanity despite the disasters of a life devoted to war. There is much more concern in these letters with his affection and passion for his wife and the mundane business of looking after his interests. "You know," he tells Cité, "how much I love to keep track of things and have order in my affairs" (p. 50). And more specifically he tells her to look after "the pigeons, the canaries, the dogs and cats. Everything must be kept alive and nothing neglected" (p. 53). This interest in the things of this world paid off. Lobau amassed, obviously with Napoleon's help when he elevated him to the Imperial peerage, a fortune. He had purchased *biens nationaux* and later some additional property. His three daughters made good marriages because they had good dowries, and thus added to the family fortune. Lobau was apolitical enough to be made a Marshal of France after Napoleon's fall, despite having fought at Waterloo. His life, a small slice of which is recorded in these very personal letters, presents something perhaps more interesting than another general's military recollections. Here we see a revolutionary and Napoleonic career. Lobau, were he more flamboyant, more obsessed with his wife or his fortune, could easily have stepped from Balzac's pages. As it is Lobau is an emblematic figure of his age, set between the bourgeoisie and the new aristocracy, more Deist than Christian, opportunistic without being a Balzacian figure, with an enduring if undernourished republican affection, and, in many ways, the best the period had to offer.

## NOTES

[1] Général Bertrand, *Lettres à Fanny 1808-1815*, annotée et présentées par Suzanne de la Vaissière-Orfila (Paris: Albin Michel, 1979).

[2] Boni de Castellane, *Journal du maréchal de Castellane*, 2 volumes (Paris: Plon, 1895).

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