

H-France Review Vol. 7 (June 2007), No. 64

Martha Hanna, *Your Death Would Be Mine: Paul and Marie Pireaud in the Great War*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2006. v + 341 pp. Index. \$26.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-674-02318-8.

Review by Margaret Darrow, Dartmouth College.

Your Death Would Be Mine is, paradoxically, about life--life expressed, affirmed, and shared--in letters. In this modest, readable study, Martha Hanna brings to life Paul and Marie Pireaud, a young peasant couple from the Dordogne, who lived, loved, and--to our good fortune--wrote letters to each other throughout the First World War. Hanna illustrates beautifully in this book what she established in "A Republic of Letters: The Epistolary Tradition in France during World War I"[1]: the generation that bore the brunt of the First World War was also the first fully literate generation of French men and women. Billions of letters--without exaggeration--passed to and from the front, at a rate of some four million every day (p. 9). At the time, therefore, Paul and Marie's often daily correspondence was far from exceptional; today, however, it is a rare, perhaps unique, source, not just a snap-shot but a long-running documentary of how World War I "imposed itself on all aspects of everyday existence and in the process transformed the lives of ordinary people" (p. 25).

Letters are hardly a new source for the study of the First World War. From the early days of the war, letters helped their recipients and the public at large to understand the experience, thoughts, and motivations of those who fought in the war's scarcely imaginable horror. During the war, local newspapers printed letters sent in by soldiers as authentic information, families published letters from sons killed in battle as memorials to their brief lives, and patriots compiled collections of letters as propaganda.[2] Historians have returned to soldiers' letters to study combatant culture. Denis Winter used the Imperial War Museum's vast collection of soldiers' letters, many retrieved from their corpses, as the basis of his ground-breaking book, *Death's Men: Soldiers of the Great War*, first published in 1978. David Omissi's edited volume, *Indian Voices of the Great War*, and Lionel Lemarchand's *Lettres censurées des tranchées, 1917* used letters from censorship files.[3]

The letters that form the basis of *Your Death Would Be Mine* are, nonetheless, different from all of these. First, this is a sustained correspondence for the whole course of the war, from 1914 until 1919, between the same two individuals, a young French artilleryman and his wife. Second, for much of this time, we have both sides of the correspondence, from Marie as well as from Paul. I can think of only one other such collection, that of Vera Brittain with her fiancé, her brother, and their friends.[4] And that brings me to the third aspect of this collection's rarity: the Pireauds were not the educated elite who, like Brittain and her correspondents, after the war published memoirs by the ton. The Pireauds were peasants as were about half of France's population in 1914 and more than half the French soldiers who fought the war, peasants from whom we have heard very little indeed. In these letters Hanna has found a precious source which she shares and explores with us in this book. We owe her two debts of gratitude, first for unearthing this collection of letters and making it known, and second for interpreting it with insight and sensitivity. Although the book is replete with excerpts from the Pireauds' letters, I hope that Hanna is also preparing an edition of this correspondence for publication.

This study of the almost daily correspondence of a young peasant couple adds significantly to our knowledge of the First World War. Like Jean-Yves Le Noaur's recent book, *Le Soldat inconnu vivant*,[5] *Your Death Would Be Mine* tells an intimate story that opens onto much wider historical vistas. Using regimental histories and prefectural reports to locate Paul and Marie in the large picture of France at

war, Hanna connects their story to the history of the war. Paul's transfer in 1915 from an initial posting in support troops behind the lines to a newly created heavy artillery regiment resulted from a shift in French strategy, away from the army's faith in the audacious offensive, represented by the celebrated 75 mm field gun, toward the efficacy of intensive bombardment. His peregrinations, from Verdun to the Somme, the Chemin des Dames, and finally Italy, recapitulates the French army's evolving tactics and priorities. Similarly, by following in Marie's letters the growing shortages, frustrations, and anxieties of the peasantry, Hanna shows us a homefront pushed to the brink of collapse.

Your Death Would Be Mine sheds new light on some old, contentious issues. Only recently have historians challenged the stereotypes that arose during the war itself of the alienated, embittered soldier and the ignorant, callous homefront. Hanna shows that despite propaganda and censorship, civilians did learn quite a lot about the horrendous nature of the war. Although Paul did not write to Marie about all he saw and felt—for example, he was unwilling or unable to describe the impact of a shell on the human body—his depictions of the hell of Verdun are nonetheless graphic and frightening to read. In fact, one of the book's few shortcomings is that Hanna's prose describing what Paul experienced often falls short of his own. Marie was not left in ignorance either about the appalling conditions at the front or about Paul's bleak prospects for survival. Paul, however, did not lose his conviction in France's ultimate victory. For him, Pétain's "On les aura" was not propaganda but a profession of faith (p. 99). His letters show that in 1917 this faith wore thin, but it did not break. And, although Paul wrote bitterly about homefront indifference and especially female infidelity, he exempted his own wife and family from this critique. As Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau found in his study of trench newspapers, so Hanna finds in these letters, that soldiers' ties to "one's own people"[6] bridged the gulf between the trenches and the home front.

Other stereotypes that emerged during the war were those of the peasant profiteer and the farm woman who betrayed her husband and France by abandoning the land for the easy life of the city. Like the alienated trenchfighter and the callous civilian, these negative portraits have found their way into histories of the war.[7] However, studies of French peasants' experience in the war are few,[8] in part, at least, due to the scarcity of sources. From Marie's letters we learn that if a countryside awash in cash was not entirely a fiction, nonetheless the propagandists' interpretation of this rural reality was far off the mark.[9] Faced with severe shortages of virtually everything necessary to cultivate the land, the French peasantry waged its own grim battle for survival and sustained its own losses to overwork, discouragement, and disease.

Hanna's study nuances Paul Fussell's claim that the First World War gave birth to modern mentality.[10] As Fussell argued was the case for British trenchfighter authors like Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves, the war taught Paul Pireaud cynicism and an appreciation for the absurd and eroded his already scant respect for authority. But more than this, the war encouraged Paul, but also Marie, to trust science rather than tradition, and to seek progress so that their precious son might grow up in a better world. For this couple, a generational split was much more significant than the divide of gender or that between combatant and civilian. Mass education had already separated Paul's and Marie's generation from their parents; the war pushed them further apart. While their parents preached custom, Paul and Marie stood together, reading child-care manuals, consulting doctors, and braving military discipline as well as social taboos in order to snatch time--and sex--together.

The most unexpected discovery in *Your Death Would Be Mine* is its depiction of a modern, child-centered family in the making: "The Pireaud correspondence reveals how profoundly the war, far from being only a military venture played out on the battlefields of the western front, left its imprint on processes and practices of life that we think of as essentially and exclusively domestic" (p. 128). As evidenced in Paul's and Marie's letters, the war fundamentally changed French childhood. Wartime mortality was a crucible in which earlier developments and concerns--Pasteurian science, the falling birthrate, general literacy, republican citizenship--fused to create new practices of childrearing. Paul and Marie feared that their

delicate infant son, Serge, might well be all that remained of Paul, all that attested to his life and to his love of Marie and hers of him. Serge was irreplaceable, worth all the time, energy, indulgence, childrearing manuals, doctor's visits, and expensive medicine to keep him alive and happy. As Marie wrote to Paul, "Nothing is too expensive for our little one" (pp. 158-9). J. A. and Olive Banks argued that when middle-class couples in Victorian England chose to have fewer children in part to raise their standard of living, they simultaneously devoted more time, attention and money to these fewer children because they were fewer, and therefore unique. [11] The First World War, Hanna argues, had a similar effect in French peasant families, making the fewer children more precious and more central.

It was also mainly through their attitudes toward childbearing and rearing that Paul and Marie self-consciously distinguished themselves from their parents and declared themselves to be modern. Dissatisfied with the first choice of name for their son as too old-fashioned, the couple eventually chose Serge, a name without precedent in their families and village (p. 167). In her letters, Marie repeatedly rejected custom in favor of science as a guide to rearing Serge and Paul encouraged her in this. They turned to many sources of information to judge and reject the traditional practices of their parents: child-rearing manuals, postcards, doctors, but also new acquaintances from far away. Marie discussed colic with Belgian refugees (p. 156) while Paul gained new insights into infant care from experienced fathers in his unit (p. 171).

Paul and Marie's correspondence is many things--descriptions of life and death at the front, reports of hardship on the homefront, conversations about child rearing--but most important, these are love letters, the record of a romantic, erotic relationship carried out at long distance for nearly five years. Sustaining a couple via correspondence was not unproblematic: what Hanna aptly calls the "corrosive fear of infidelity" (p. 268) did not spare the Pireauds despite their regular letters. Nor is communicating via letter a natural skill. As Hanna argued in her *American Historical Review* article cited above, it was the new public elementary education that taught the purpose and practice of letter-writing to France's World-War-I generation. School children wrote as composition exercises New Year's greetings and letters confessing personal faults and describing local events--but they did not learn to write love letters. I wish that Hanna had explored the conventions and vocabulary of love letters of this period. Were Paul and Marie's expressions--"our gentle caresses and other things that are even better" (p. 226)--their own invention or part of the popular culture? From what sources might they have learned written expression of their emotional and physical longings: novels? letter-writing manuals? How did their verbal love-making evolve over time, from the days of their courtship during Paul's military service in Morocco, to the first months of their separation in 1914, through the war to Paul's demobilization in July 1919?

Perhaps this is probing too much at a relationship which *Your Death Would Be Mine* reveals as a unique whole. Paul and Marie emerge as individuals bound together by the experiences they shared in their letters. Revealingly, Paul used the same word, "calvary," to describe Marie's suffering in childbirth (p. 150) and his own suffering in battle (p. 172). Through their letters, they endured all this together. Even the book's title, taken from one of Marie's letters to Paul, could as easily have come from one of his to her. Hanna succeeds in showing us a portrait of a wartime marriage that is individual, rich, and full, but not extraordinary. There must have been many Pauls and Maries in France (and in Britain, and in Germany) who sustained themselves every day by taking up pen and paper. *Your Death Would Be Mine* answers that most troubling of all questions about the First World War: how did anyone survive? They wrote letters.

NOTES

- [1] Martha Hanna, "A Republic of Letters: The Epistolary Tradition in France during World War I," *American Historical Review* 108 (2003): 1338-1361.
- [2] An example of letters published as a memorial is Eugène Emmanuel Lemercier, *Lettres d'un soldat: août 1914-avril 1915* (Paris: Chapelot, 1916). Joseph Bédier, *Les Crimes allemands d'après les témoignages allemands* (Paris: A. Colin, 1915) is an example of letters published as propaganda.
- [3] Denis Winter, *Death's Men: Soldiers of the Great War* (London: Allen Lane, 1978); David E. Omissi, ed., *Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers' Letters 1914-18* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999); Lionel Lemarchand, *Lettres censurées des tranchées, 1917* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001).
- [4] Alan Bishop and Mark Bostridge, eds., *Letters from a Lost Generation: First World War Letters of Vera Brittain and Four Friends* (Boston, Mass.: Northeastern University Press, 1998).
- [5] Jean-Yves Le Noaur, *Le Soldat inconnu vivant* (Paris: Hachette, 2002).
- [6] Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War 1914-1918: National Sentiment and Trench Journalism in France during the First World War*, trans. by Helen McPhail (Oxford: Berg, 1992), p. 134.
- [7] For example, André Ducasse, Jacques Meyer, and Gabriel Perreux, *Vie et mort des français, 1914-1918* (Paris: Hachette, 1959), p. 259.
- [8] One such is Roger Laouénan, *La moisson rouge: les Bretons dans la grande guerre* (Paris: Editions France-Empire, 1987).
- [9] For example, Emmanuel Labat, "La terre pendant l'épreuve . Le devoir paysan," *Revue des deux mondes*, 87, no. 41 (Sept. 1, 1917), and René Bazin, "Tenir aux champs," *L'Echo de Paris*, Oct. 26, 1917.
- [10] Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).
- [11] J. A. and Olive Banks, *Feminism and Family Planning in Victorian England* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964).

Margaret H. Darrow Dartmouth College margaret.h.darrow@dartmouth.edu

Copyright © 2007 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Review Vol. 7 (June 2007), No. 64

ISSN 1553-9172