

Nicolas Beaupré, *Écrire en guerre, écrire la guerre. France, Allemagne 1914–1920. Préface d’Annette Becker, Paris (CNRS Éditions) 2006, 292 p. (CNRS Histoire), ISBN 2-271-06433-3, EUR 25,00*

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The First World War produced a remarkable array of war writers whose work continues to arouse debate. Anglophone historians focus on whether war writing advanced the cause of modernism; in contrast, their French counterparts concentrate on the role of the war writer as an historical witness¹. This French paradigm stems from interwar accusations that writers had fuelled the war through propaganda, the so-called »trahison des clercs«. As a result, war writing became suspect; the French critic Jean Norton Cru argued in his 1929 book »Témoins« that only writing by combatants, which bore witness to the horror of the trenches in an accurate, objective and unembellished way, remained acceptable. Literary flourish, he argued, was deceptive and literature that incorporated war myths, abhorrent². These criteria rapidly came to define French debate.

Norton Cru’s work, republished in 1993, and analysed in Frédéric Rousseau’s »Le Procès des témoins de la Grande Guerre« (Paris, 2003), has often been criticised. However, rarely has it been as persuasively challenged as in Beaupré’s well-researched comparative analysis of French and German combatant writers. He sets out to investigate the phenomenon of the soldier-writer during the conflict, contending that the war produced a new type of writer, the »écrivain combattant« who both fought and wrote. Divided into three parts, the first section of his study analyses the context in which combatant writing was published and censored. The second section deconstructs how combatant writers represented wartime violence and suffering, while the final part looks at how they interpreted the conflict within broader eschatological frameworks and dealt with demobilization.

Beaupré rejects Norton Cru’s thesis on a number of levels: First, for combatant writers, he argues, writing was another form of combat; their texts did not just witness the war, they also contributed to fighting it by providing frameworks of meaning that legitimised their side’s effort as a ‘sacrifice’ or a ‘defensive’ war. Second, there was no such thing as a text that purely witnessed; all writing at some level also interpreted or represented the conflict in the light of existing wartime cultural beliefs. Beaupré finds revealing inferences, textual disjunctions or allusion in even the most basic texts. Moreover, an unembellished narrative was no guarantee of accuracy – as he shows, simplistic war accounts were often styled according to editors’ demands. Finally, Beaupré also rejects Norton Cru’s contention that literary devices detracted from a text’s truthfulness; this study shows that combatant

¹ On the Anglophone debate, see: Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring. The Modern in Cultural History*, New York, 1989; Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*, London, 1990; Jay M. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning. The Great War in European Cultural History*, Cambridge, 1995.

² Leonard V. Smith, *Jean Norton Cru and combatants’ literature of the First World War*, in: *Modern and Contemporary France* 9/2 (2001), p. 161–169.

writers often aspired both to witness to their war experiences *and* to write complex literature. The two ambitions were not seen as incompatible.

In fact, Beaupré deliberately focuses upon the level of textual representations, skilfully showing how they offer revealing insights for the historian into the wartime mindsets of writers and readers. This analysis reveals combatant authors' fears: some were alarmed at their own 'temporary savagery' at the front and looked to depictions of the soldier as 'hero-martyr' for reassurance. The deconstruction of representations is adept; the only minor criticism is that Beaupré could have engaged more with Paul Fussell's work, particularly on how the pastoral functions in British war literature, which could fruitfully be applied to French and German texts here³.

Beaupré's approach is new on several counts. He limits his study to combatant writing produced between 1914 and 1920, arguing, convincingly, that its interpretation of the war differed to that of the interwar period. He is not genre-specific, examining some 291 French and 242 German books published between 1914 and 1920, including poetry collections, novels and personal war accounts, contending that taken as a corpus, combatant writing can be analysed as a meta-narrative – individual texts when read together can provide us with a larger, overall interpretation of the war. Beaupré's work is also, crucially, comparative, revealing that French and German combatant writers often represented the war in similar ways, engaging with common home front cultural representations of the conflict: motifs such as sacrifice, suffering, martyrdom and heroism predominated. Prose was also the most popular genre in both countries. However, national differences emerged during demobilization: while a French postwar association for combatant writers, the Association des écrivains combattants, developed, with membership from both right and left of the political spectrum, in Weimar Germany political divisions meant that no such organisation was possible.

This book presents important conclusions. There was little antiwar sentiment in wartime combatant writing; the pacifist view of the conflict as a pointless slaughter only emerged in the 1920s. Censorship did not determine this – in a fascinating chapter, Beaupré assesses »Der Hauptmann« by Friedrich Loofs and »Sous Verdun« by Maurice Genevoix, to find that the censor's cuts to the texts were very minor. In both countries, censorship principally targeted the printed press or foreign publications rather than creative writing, which was often left to writers, recruited by the military, to censor in what was largely a negotiated process: Norton Cru failed to realise when he railed against the excisions made to Guy Hallé's book »Là-bas avec ceux qui souffrent« that Apollinaire was the censor responsible⁴. In France and Germany, combatant writers enjoyed considerable moral status as soldiers serving at the front. Publishers feted them and literary critics observed their own version of »Inter arma silent musae«, avoiding harsh reviews.

As a result, combatant writers were actually relatively free to depict the horrors of trench warfare. They did so with gusto; contrary to common assumptions, wartime writing was very frank about war

³ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Oxford 1975.

⁴ Nicolas Beaupré, *Écrire en guerre, écrire la guerre*. France, Allemagne 1914–1920, Paris 2006, p. 89.

violence. Indeed, Beaupré argues, it actually emphasised the brutality of the trenches in order to highlight to the home front the extent of the sacrifice made by the troops. Even killing was sometimes depicted, although sexual behaviour or atrocities remained taboo unless attributed to the enemy. Descriptions of weaponry served as a metonym for killing; readers at the time were fully aware of the violence implicit in accounts of armaments chosen for combat. After the war, some writers sought to distance themselves from their wartime opinions; Genevoix, for example, cut the more bloodthirsty descriptions of wartime killings from later editions of his work⁵. As with so much else in this study, this textual analysis is thorough and convincing. Beaupré successfully contends that the phenomenon of the combatant writer in the First World War was something new and unprecedented. Whether the war produced a new form of literature remains a major question for historians; this book's achievement is to bring us much closer to the answer.

⁵ Ibid., p. 117–118.