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Marilène Patten Henry, *A Zouave's Journey: Recollections of a Fightsoldier in the 37th African Division*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007. xi + 142 pp. Illustrations, notes, and bibliography. \$61.95 U.S. (cl.) ISBN 978-0-8204-9708-2.

Review by Michelle K. Rhoades, Wabash College.

In this brief volume Marilène Patten Henry attempts to reconstruct the life and wartime activities of Achille Lecreux. Lecreux grew up in the Nièvre as an orphan born into rural poverty at the turn of the century. He spent time as a laborer and joined the French army during World War I. Surviving the war he married and raised a family. Though Lecreux hoped to leave the war behind him, his memory as a member of the 3rd Zouaves lingered well into his twilight years (p. 5). In 1985 he contacted Mayor Lapeyrie of the small town of Hirson to inquire if anyone remembered that the Zouaves liberated the town during World War I (p. 3). Sensing an opportunity, Lapeyrie introduced Lecreux to the director of a local museum. Thus began Lecreux's six-year correspondence with Ginette Day, the director of the Musée-Centre de Documentation Alfred Desmases in Hirson. Due largely to Ms. Day's correspondence with him, Lecreux deposited his wartime memorabilia, letters, and *carnet de guerre* with the museum. Lecreux's personal archives would seem an ideal source for a study of the French Zouaves and a soldier's personal experience during World War I. However, the book as a whole is marked by organizational issues and factual errors that detract from Lecreux and his experiences.

Henry's interest in Lecreux is understandable: his archives are a unique source. However, the biography based on Lecreux's papers feels thin indeed when compared to the methodological advances in recent works by Jo Burr Margadant, Elinor Accampo, and others.[1] The New Biography suggests that as a methodological tool biography can greatly enhance historians' understanding of a cultural context as well as an individual's sense of place within that culture. Historians have stressed that it is not enough to retell the events of a person's life. Instead, those working in biography have focused on reconstructing identities to better understand how individuals "performed" their lives as historical actors and adapted to shifting contexts.[2] To be fair, Henry seems content to simply recount Lecreux's life experiences. By limiting her work however, the reader is unable to understand fully Lecreux's place in twentieth-century French history. Without a doubt part of the problem rests with Henry's use of sources. Henry relies a great deal on Lecreux's war diary to decipher his experiences but at only thirty-six pages long three inches wide and four and a half inches tall it is (as Henry eventually admits) a "rather scant" resource (p. 49). As a result of her reliance on this source, the author speculates too often about Lecreux's activities and reactions, leaving historical context—and accuracy—to the side.

Henry's introduction and first chapter function as an overview of Achille Lecreux's early life. Textual problems appear rapidly in this portion of the book. For example, lacking evidence about Lecreux's parents Henry focuses instead on the moment of his conception. Speculating, she asks the reader to consider if Lecreux's father arrived as "the proverbial cad who came, saw, and conquered," eventually leaving his mother "for other and, eventually, greener pastures" (p. 8)? Without a discussion of late-nineteenth century French sexuality and morality, the reader is left to wonder if abandonment after pregnancy or casual sex remained common during this period. In another case, Henry argues that a brief hospitalization in Lecreux's early years created a painful and important moment for him, marked

by “a definite change in his handwriting on pages seven through fifteen of the notebook” (p. 59). While intriguing, Henry offers no further evidence for her claim, eventually offering something of an apology for making her argument. She writes that “in the absence of any documentary evidence, it is impossible to ascertain exactly why Achille was laid up for three weeks and what transpired during that time, as he divulges neither the nature of his illness nor the treatment he received” (p. 59). Other than a shift in handwriting we learn precious little about Lecreux’s hospitalization or why Henry found it an experience of note. Finally, as Henry presses her argument that Lecreux faced difficulties in his early childhood, she fails to unpack Lecreux’s observations. In one instance she describes a moment from Lecreux’s childhood where he picked up a piece of bread rejected by those around him. Analyzing the moment Henry explains, “The sentence ‘I was ashamed to pick up this bread’ can be interpreted in two different ways: Achille was perturbed either by the physical position generally adopted by an underling in the presence of a master or by the color of the bread that he retrieved.” Henry adds that if Lecreux were still alive we could resolve the confusion by asking “whether [Lecreux] had intended to stress *pick up* or *this*” in his papers” (p. 25). Without more evidence or a greater discussion of the context, the reader is left to guess at why Henry chose to include this evidence in her text.

Chapter two of *A Zouave’s Journey* presents the origins of the French Zouaves and their role in France’s military history. Emphasizing their nineteenth-century African origins and the respect the fighting force commanded, Henry notes that admiration for the Zouaves spread as far as the United States. Citing praise-filled passages from the West Virginia *Daily Intelligencer*, Henry notes that their nineteenth-century American contemporaries felt the Zouaves were “endowed with super-human strength, agility and marksmanship,” surely all qualities greatly appreciated during the American Civil War (p. 37). However, Henry’s successful foray into military history is short-lived as the chapter quickly digresses into a disjointed attempt to connect the Zouaves’s entry into the Franco-Prussian war with their resistance to the mutinies of World War I and impressions of the Zouaves formed by Dutch artist Vincent Van Gough (p. 38). The organizational issues apparent at the end of chapter two, represented by a failure to link important historical events in a cohesive analysis, reappear throughout the remainder of Henry’s text and detract from this effort at biography.

In chapter three “The Diary,” Henry addresses Achille Lecreux’s writing in greater detail. Defending her choice to focus on Lecreux’s brief diary she argues that that quality, not quantity, is important. I agree. Even very brief documents can provide a wealth of material with which historians may profitably work. However, even this argument is marred by Henry’s simultaneous admission that “Achille Lecreux is definitely not a wordsmith, far from it” (p. 50). In spite of this, Henry justifies her reliance on this document by arguing that “Jacques Meyer, who spent many months at the front and lived side by side with men from all walks of society, noticed that it was difficult for the rural elements to conceive, let alone formulate, any original ideas. Accustomed as they were to living and working by rote, traditions, examples, and habits, they were hard put to describe or explain anything beyond the scope of what they considered normal everyday life” (p. 50). Following this argument, historians should accept that World War I soldiers did not produce any significant prose. Sadly, nothing could be further from the truth. Historians Martha Hanna and Leonard Smith have addressed the extensive epistemological culture that existed among the *poilus* during World War I and the historical value that a detailed study of soldiers’ written works can provide.^[3] Martha Hanna in particular has identified the extensive concerns about health, family life, social relations, and wartime politics that Paul and Marie Pireaud expressed in the hundreds of letters they wrote to each other during World War I. In the case of the Pireaud spouses and many others from rural France, written commentary on politics, family, and the course of the war became common, something that Henry would have done well to note.

Chapter five “The Golden Years,” begins with a discussion of Lecreux’s experience with facial wounds and focuses on medical advances during World War I. While the organizational issues in *A Zouave’s Journey* are distracting, the historical errors present in chapter five are troubling. In this chapter Henry argues that “interest in plastic surgery moved glacially” and “the art of healing during World War I did

not include giving new and socially acceptable faces to men who had been horribly deformed, the *gueules cassées*" (p. 100). Henry's claim that military doctors showed little interest plastic surgery is based on Lecreux's experiences wearing bandages for a facial wound he received in battle (p. 101). However, this claim is untrue. Doctors in the French Military Health Service showed great interest in treating facial wounds and creating a more normal appearance for wounded soldiers. In Bordeaux, military doctors specialized in facial wounds and their repair. They broke and reset jaws, wired cheekbones, enlarged palates, re-aligned teeth and did reconstructive surgeries so detailed and precise that even the most severely deformed soldiers walked away with remarkably improved appearances.[4] Of course, not all the severely wounded could be treated effectively. In *Gueules Cassées* Sophie Delaporte analyzed the struggle of French surgeons to keep up with the numbers of wounded and the difficulties the new class of facial injury presented.[5]

The goal of this work, to explore the life and experiences of the World War I Zouave Achille Lecreux, is deeply promising. However, *A Zouave's Journey* is riddled with organizational problems and historical errors that detract from the endeavor. The casual reader or history buff may be charmed by this text and its eight illustrations; the professional historian will find this work dissatisfying.

NOTES

[1] See for example, Jo Burr Margadant, ed., *The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Elinor Accampo, *Blessed Motherhood, Bitter Fruit: Nelly Roussel and the Politics of Female Pain in Third Republic France* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); and Lloyd E. Ambrosius, ed., *Writing Biography: Historians and Their Craft* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004).

[2] Margadant, pp. 7-8.

[3] See for example Leonard V. Smith, *The Embattled Self: French Soldiers' Testimony of the Great War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2007) and Martha Hanna, *Your Death Would be Mine; Paul and Marie Pireaud in the Great War* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 2006).

[4] Municipal Archives of Bordeaux, 2810 H 1 "Service de Santé"

[5] See Sophie Delaporte, *Gueules Cassées de la Grande Guerre* (Paris: Editions Agnès Viénot, 2004). See also the excellent website <http://www.bium.univ-paris5.fr/1418/cadre0.htm> viewed 5/29/2008.

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