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Thomas Dodman, *What Nostalgia Was: War, Empire, and the Time of a Deadly Emotion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018. xi + 275 pp. Notes, archival sources and index. \$35 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-226-49294-0.

Review Essay by Susan Foley, University of Melbourne

In March 2018, *The New Yorker* carried a cartoon in which three ordinary-looking characters reflected wistfully on their lunch two hours earlier.[1] Entitled “Two-Hour Nostalgia,” this image captured, with humorous exaggeration, the outcome of the centuries-long process studied by Thomas Dodman in *What Nostalgia Was*: the transformation of nostalgia from a potentially “deadly” emotion into a “natural,” even banal, phenomenon of daily life that provides fodder for the cartoonist. As the history of a particular emotion, Dodman’s book joins a host of others that have appeared in recent years. [2] But it is more wide-ranging than that. With its forays into medical history, military history, and imperial/colonial history, amongst others, this richly veined and multi-faceted study deploys nostalgia as a window onto a world in the throes of becoming “modern.”

For Dodman, nostalgia is best seen as “a *social* phenomenon grounded in everyday practices” (p. 8, emphasis original). Rather than focusing only on its “discursive construction,” then, he investigates the “emotional practices” surrounding it. [3] Dodman writes: “the therapeutic protocols and professional strategies of doctors, the daily maneuvering, longing, and letter-writing of soldiers, [and] the construction of colonial settlements and lifeworlds are fundamental to understanding the historicity of nostalgia.” These practices not only produced nostalgia as a new word, coined to describe a newly identified illness in 1688, but also expressed “a certain kind of subjectivity,” one suited to the character of the epoch (p. 9).

After two chapters that discuss the emergence of nostalgia and its diffusion among the medical community from 1688 to the French Revolution, Dodman traces the history of nostalgia through a series of mainly military case studies. This is partly because nostalgia quickly came to be seen primarily as a soldiers’ disease, and partly because military doctors were the specialists on the subject. It astonishes us that nostalgia was a leading cause of death among eighteenth-century soldiers, listed as the cause of death on medical certificates. Dodman aims to get beyond astonishment and historicize nostalgia. The chapters on the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars (chapters three and four), in which he analyses “the clinical practice of French military surgeons and physicians who confronted the disease in the theatre of war” (p. 66), are, therefore, particularly compelling.

Dodman aims to explore “what nostalgia meant to those who diagnosed it and those who were diagnosed with it” (p. 6). If doctors wrote a great deal about nostalgia, however, the meaning of nostalgia from the sufferers’ point of view is hard to come by, since their writings are relatively few and they generally did not deploy the term. This means a heavier reliance

on doctors' accounts of patients' symptoms and emotions than Dodman himself, and the reader, might like. Doctors necessarily interpreted patients' symptoms within their own medical frameworks. Moreover, as Dodman explains, army surgeons and medical officers took (in part) an instrumental approach to nostalgia: their expertise in its diagnosis and treatment was a key element in their quest for professionalization.

Doctors rejected battlefield trauma as the cause of nostalgia (p. 73). This is surprising, because the outbreaks of nostalgia documented here occurred typically, though not only, in times of great danger. The word "fear" is never mentioned, either by the doctors or by Dodman, although fear would appear to be a natural reaction to the increasing scale and brutality of conflict, the "bloodbaths" and "horrific cycles of violence and retribution" of Napoleonic warfare (pp. 71-2). Perhaps fear was not an admissible emotion, even for the *hommes sensibles* of the late eighteenth century, though their *sensibilité* did make them susceptible, it was thought, to nostalgia. Dodman points out, however, that the "conceptual world" of soldiers in this period was not that of the *poilu*: they experienced not "trauma" but *déchirement* (tearing away/heartbreak) given that, for them, cognition and emotion were "not opposed but fundamentally entangled" (p. 113).

The cause of nostalgia among soldiers, as Dodman and others have argued, lay not in battlefield trauma but in the military experience itself, with its institutionalization, increasingly iron discipline, boredom, fatigue, and "mindless drill" (p. 73). Such regimentation, Dodman contends, contradicted the Revolutionary soldier's self-perception as a free man and a citizen. Moreover, he suggests that changes in the army were "symptomatic of deeper social transformations." If the unresolvable tension between being "simultaneously free and unfree" produced the nostalgic eighteenth-century soldier, it also foreshadowed the dilemma of "commodified labor in general" in "liberal capitalist societies" (pp. 74-5). This connection is central to Dodman's claim that the history of nostalgia is the history of the coming of modernity, interpreted broadly to include a revolution in modes of thought and in emotional configurations, that is, in fundamental "structures of feeling."

In Chapter four, soldiers' letters, particularly to their mothers, provide the basis for Dodman's nuanced and sensitive discussion of emotion and masculinity. That they should claim to be missing their families is not surprising since the notion of "missing" the other is fundamental to the letter's message. Besides, they had good reason, in a brutal war, to yearn to be elsewhere. A powerful case study of Joseph-Louis-Gabriel Noël, who volunteered in 1791, allows Dodman to illustrate not only the "deep emotional disembedding" but also the "bipolar structure of feeling" caused by becoming a soldier: Noël contrasts "the terrible business of killing" with the "gentle and human" home he had left behind (p. 104), revealing that the spatial and temporal dislocation of enlistment was exacerbated by deeper conflicts within the self. If Noël's experience of war was "typical," as Dodman argues, we might nevertheless wonder how many soldiers had such insight into their own experiences.

Dodman links the emotional crises of soldiers like Noël to changing norms of masculinity that, by the end of the Napoleonic period, saw the "eighteenth century man of feeling" give

way to the “nineteenth century virile male.” Nostalgia became a “male illness” of “unmanly warriors”; similar symptoms in women were cast as hysteria (pp. 116-8). Dodman’s analysis raises interesting questions about the connections between war, nostalgia, and the new mode of masculinity. He cites the rich scholarship on changing notions of sex and gender, amongst which Thomas Laqueur’s concept of an emergent “two-sex” model of the human body in the late eighteenth century is pivotal.[4] Dodman’s argument that nostalgia was a symptom of the “muted male suffering” arising from an increasingly “martial manliness” (p. 117) is consistent with the view that the sexes were already perceived as essentially different and incommensurable. It might also suggest, further, that war was critical in the accomplishment of this shift in concepts of gender. That linkage might have been explored further.

Moreover, it seems that “home,” encapsulated in the mother, stands not just for the warm, familial environment longed for by soldiers, but also for the feminine – including the dimensions of the self that the emerging two-sex model defined as inappropriate for men. In that context we might ask whether soldiers’ homesickness was simply a “psychological regression to a lost age of innocence” (p. 104). Dodman’s own analysis suggests that it may also have been an attempt to heal the “bipolar structure of feeling” he identified in his discussion of Noël, a structure reflecting the new notions of masculinity and femininity as radically opposed. Changing notions of masculinity suggest, further, that veterans’ nostalgia after Waterloo was more than a “benign longing for an idealized past” (p. 118). If martial vigor was integral to the new model of masculinity, then defeated veterans were “emasculated,” and this may explain their suffering.

The chapters on the nineteenth century explore the “fitful” process through which nostalgia became benign and naturalized. In the Orleanist period, nostalgia was transformed into a “fashionable disease” compatible with the new “romantic structure of feeling.” It was, moreover, “commodified” in literature and vaudeville, as befitted the commercialism of the age. But the conquest and colonization of Algeria from the 1840s halted the transition to harmlessness, as doctors turned to racial and climatic theories to explain the disease (pp. 154, 159-62). Both soldiers and settlers, men and women, were prey to its ravages in the colony (despite doctors’ reluctance to accept that nostalgia could affect civilians: p. 167). Dodman finds the explanation in the “coercive heteronomy” shared by sufferers: an elaborate way of saying that they were subject to others and lacked autonomy. That explains why the many “exiles, prisoners, and penal convicts” deported from Europe in the nineteenth century were also prey to nostalgia (pp. 167-8).

The definitive shift in the history of nostalgia, for Dodman, began in the 1850s and became fully established under the Third Republic. The last French military fatality attributed to nostalgia was recorded in 1884 although, in testament to its lingering racial profile, nostalgia survived until the First World War as a diagnosis for colonial troops (p. 184). Nostalgia among settlers was gradually re-imagined as “a benign form of homesickness,” ensuring that settlers resisted “creolization” and retained their French identity (pp. 173-5). Its new role is illustrated by the 5, 000 Alsatian emigrants to Algeria after 1870. Migrating in community groups to replica Alsatian villages, Dodman argues that they were not “disembedded” from

their former lives but found “home” anew. But perhaps it is equally important to note that they were not subject to the “coercive heteronomy” that provoked nostalgia in late eighteenth-century soldiers and in the settlers of the 1840s, or at least not to the same extent.

The inclusion of more civilian examples would have strengthened Dodman’s argument that the history of nostalgia illuminates a broader socio-historical phenomenon. As he points out, however, civilians likely to suffer from nostalgia – “displaced people, emigrants and settlers, domestic servants, boarding school pupils” (p. 11) or “prison and asylum inmates, domestic housemaids, and the first factory workers” (p. 91) – left few sources. They lacked the political leverage of decimated armies, and their suffering offered doctors little opportunity for professional advancement. Dodman shows considerable inventiveness in the search for evidence of nostalgia among civilians, turning to Parisian coroners’ reports and records of insane asylums, and combing sources like Villermé’s study of the “physical and moral condition” of early factory workers, to find telltale cases. Still, we are left with only tantalizing snippets, particularly insofar as women sufferers are concerned.

Curiously, Dodman does not pursue the case of the nostalgic Communards exiled to New Caledonia.[5] Where military doctors generally supported the claims of nostalgic soldiers, those responsible for the exiles dismissed their claims for political reasons. This gives added insight into doctors’ diagnostic practices. More importantly, Communards’ letters would have allowed a different group of sufferers to speak.

Chapter five on the 1820s and 1830s stands out as the only one devoted to literary and theatrical manifestations of contemporary views on nostalgia. Did the reimagining of nostalgia in the later nineteenth century not produce new cultural manifestations of that transformation as well? This study could usefully have considered that possibility.

The explanation for the naturalization of nostalgia is less persuasive than the account of its earlier rise, perhaps because the naturalization process was spasmodic and its mechanisms diffuse and abstract. Ultimately, Dodman’s explanation lies in the coming of modernity itself, a process illustrated by his colonial case study. Certainly, as Dodman shows, the French colonial project, especially after 1870, might be seen as a product of modernity in that it was a response to (and a contributing factor in) the disruptions and uprooting of peoples that “modern” political and imperial agendas created. Like them, it utilized “modern” ideas and technologies, as well as “modern” financial arrangements, business practices, and advertising, to achieve its ends. Dodman suggests, moreover, citing the flourishing literature on changing perceptions of time and space, that the history of nostalgia in the colonization of Algeria points to a world becoming smaller, with old and new perceived as cyclical rather than as linear (pp. 189-90). The case of Algerian colonization undoubtedly illustrates some of the mechanisms of modernization at work, but as Dodman points out too, it is “symptomatic” of broader trends (p. 189), rather than sustaining a generalized claim about nostalgia and modernity.

While the University of Chicago Press found room for some valuable illustrations, it might have paid closer editorial attention to the text, which is blemished by some typographical errors (particularly, the execution of Louis “XIV”, p. 67; “wondering” wombs,’ p. 118; “shear” boredom, p. 156; “1787” for 1878, p. 188).

Nevertheless, the imagination and critical insight that the author brings to his material provides the lasting impression of the book. Not only does it offer an intriguing and sometimes surprising account of the history of nostalgia, but it also makes a powerful argument that “pay[ing] more attention to emotional life” (p. 194) can greatly enrich our understanding of change over time as it was lived and felt by the peoples of the past.

NOTES

[1] *The New Yorker*, March 26, 2018, p. 19.

[2] These include studies of fear, shame, envy, anger, jealousy, love, happiness, and sentimentality. Useful bibliographies can be found in Jan Plamper, *The History of Emotions: An Introduction* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2012); Barbara H. Rosenwein and Riccardo Cristiani, *What Is the History of Emotions?* (Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 2017).

[3] See Monique Scheer, “Are Emotions a Kind of Practice (and Is That What Makes Them Have a History)? A Bourdieuan Approach to Understanding Emotion,” *History and Theory* 51, no. 2 (2012): 193-220 (cited p. 9). For Scheer, the term “emotional practices” describes the practices through which people formulate, express, communicate, and regulate feelings.

[4] Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

[5] He mentions New Caledonia, p. 168, and cites Alice Bullard’s work on the subject, p. 9.

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