

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 Peter N. Stearns, George Mason University

I have long believed that deploying history to explain the origins and evolution of a disease is one of the most interesting and significant uses of the craft, and a key argument for the importance of the discipline in understanding the human condition. [1] To have a work that illustrates not just the origins and causes of a new illness, but also its subsequent evolution – into a genuine epidemic – and then further its gradual and complex termination is a multiple achievement, and Thomas Dodman deserves every credit for an ambitious and successful analysis. I confess I had been looking forward to this book for some time, and I was in no way disappointed.

Any comment must of course note the impressive research base. The argument about nostalgia depends on extensive reading in medical, military and cultural history, across a significant slice of time – if not exactly *longue durée*, as Dodman argues (p. 5), at least not *courte*. The apparatus is also appropriately embellished with citations to relevant secondary work, including theory and methodology.

Nostalgia, as Dodman captures it, clearly cuts across the conventional modern-premodern divide, though of course there have been other arguments that the “modern” (most particularly in intellectual history) really begins in the later seventeenth century. The ability to use nostalgia to illustrate changes both in military organization and in medicalization that begin to show up before the eighteenth century, embellished as well by the emergence of a more commercial economy, offers a useful and persuasive challenge to more conventional periodization, for the results clearly persisted well into the nineteenth century.

The contribution to French history (including relevant aspects of the colonization and settlement attempts in Algeria, a less familiar addition to the national story) is significant. Dodman makes a strong case for focusing in detail on a national experience, even in an age of more global histories – though I will return to this point in another context. Certainly the book uses nostalgia, and emotions history more generally, to connect the experience of many relatively ordinary individuals to the changes in military recruitment and political structure that began to come into view in regions like Alsace early on, and then more generally with the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. New kinds of medical research, and the growing importance of military doctors both in seeking professional advantage and in trying to assist troubled recruits, come across clearly, again particularly within the French context though with some connection to developments in Switzerland and elsewhere. The extent to which it began to pay off to claim nostalgia, in an otherwise rigid military environment, further illustrates the range of impact. The recurrent medical theme also embraces fascinating discussions of the treatments that were ventured, with varying degrees of success. Finally, the sections of the book that deal with the renderings of nostalgia in arts and literature, though a bit more descriptive, are also interesting.

The explanation of nostalgia as a result of the conjuncture between organizational changes, particularly those that altered the experience of ordinary citizen-soldiers, and medical research and practice is largely persuasive as well. The discussion of debates over how to group soldiers from different regions is worth the price of admission in itself, again as a way to bridge between personal emotional reactions and evolving military structure. The book does dance around the possibility of an additional factor: changes in the emotional intensity of family life, and particularly the bonds between mothers and sons, that would make nostalgia more likely when a recruit was moved away from home. It is clear that family sentimentality strongly affected the ways nostalgia was culturally portrayed, and this in itself adds to our understanding of the culture of private life. But whether some of the affectionate shifts that other family historians have discussed played a more active role in causing the phenomenon is left somewhat indeterminate.

I am impressed as well by the case the book makes for the rise and fall of nostalgia as a distinct disease experience over time, and not simply the result of distinctive labeling. The differences between nostalgia and PTSD (p.113 and elsewhere) might deserve a bit more attention, but the author's delineations are plausible. The kinds of trauma that more modern weaponry would cause were not the same as the results of dislocation between the late seventeenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, and this claim holds up quite well, supplemented of course by the experiences discussed in soldiers' letters and other relevant material. Again, the exploration of a particular, and significant, disease as a discrete historical moment is truly intriguing.

By the same token the book serves as a particularly effective and mature example of the power of the emotions history approach more generally, which is exactly how Professor Dodman situates his contribution. Emotional experience is an important facet of the historical record, and this book abundantly illustrates both how it can be calculated and how its connections with more familiar historical topics – including the French revolution itself – can be determined.

There are a few bones to pick, though they in no way detract from the book's considerable achievement.

First: I think it is usually harder to deal with the decline of a phenomenon, like nostalgia-as-disease, than with its rise, partly because the evidence involves a diminution of references rather than more explicit argument and commentary. I think the case the book makes, that nostalgia was progressively redefined as a milder and less damaging sensation rather than a debilitating disease, is solid enough. It clearly did not disappear – the examples of men who ended up longing for past military service are a charming reminder – but it changed in character. But I am slightly less confident about the causation involved than I was in dealing with earlier arguments about the reasons for nostalgia's advent and evolution in the first place. Dodman cites claims about the modernization of the French peasantry and growing nationalism in accounting for the fact the military service or other displacements became less disorienting (p. 155). And maybe so; actually, as a modernization fan, I would like to believe so. But did the rise of other diagnoses – such as shell shock, by the early twentieth century – also play a role, concealing some ongoing nostalgia of the more traditional sort? Were troops in the far-flung empire by 1900 now really immune (though the book, in noting increasing efforts to export European environments for settlers in some colonies, may suggest some other reasons for an affirmative answer). There might have been a bit more exploration of the terminus.

This said, I fully accept that part of the treatment that focuses on how medical personnel and other leaders shifted their inquiry, emphasizing a rhetoric in which French men would now be

expected to prove adaptable, that residual nostalgia would mainly be sought in groups such as colonial recruits whose race would help account for greater psychological vulnerability. If professionals turn their attention away, it's hard for a disease to survive.

Second: the focus on the military, and therefore on men, is carefully and explicitly offered. And at one level it is surely correct. The folks who were particularly interested in this problem were military employees, facing some real problems of desertion or incapacity. A similar professional body was not so clearly available for other possible victims. But Dodman himself speculates about potential for similar debilities on the part of first-generation factory workers or even female domestics in from the countryside – even though there was no medical body available to focus on the resulting problems. And the immigrant experience is still more tantalizing. The example of widespread nostalgia, and attendant defections, among French groups sent to colonize Algeria might well apply to immigrant categories more generally. Dodman is quite aware of this wider canvass but does not quite paint it.

Finally, and most important for the H-France audience, there is the comparative claim. While offering clear attention to the initial incidence of debilitating nostalgia among Swiss troops, and the reasons for it, Dodman ends not only by focusing almost exclusively on France but by claiming, at least in introduction (p. 12), that the whole phenomenon became especially French. Not exclusively: the book points to concerns among non-French troops fighting with Napoleon, and the officials who dealt with them, and it refers to some attention to nostalgia in the British navy, in Germany and Italy, and of course in the American civil war (here referring to the important study by Susan Matt) [2]. A brief passage wonders about comparing British experience in India (including the effort to create little Britains) to the French encounter with Algeria. But this is not a full or careful comparison, which admittedly would have called for a very different research program and a considerably different book. Without this, however, the special Frenchness is somewhat more asserted than proved.

But perhaps, despite the caveats. French medicine was certainly distinctively poised to pick up the problem in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The position of military doctors may have been unusual as well, and assessing their role is a particularly persuasive part of the book. The military experience of the revolution and Napoleonic years, plucking so many ordinary people without their consent, created unusually widespread issues relating to citizen-soldiering, and again Dodman handles all this quite well. Britain, he contends in contrast, simply had less need to worry about citizens in military service until much later in time.

The disease of nostalgia was a genuinely significant human response to many of the developments associated with the early stages of modern political and economic change. Its history helps show the real human cost of these same developments, displaying the benefits of attention to shifting emotional patterns in the process. The emerging medical establishment is portrayed both as profiting from and genuinely seeking to alleviate the new disease as well – a refreshing take on the complexities of medicalization. And all this occurred, though not exclusively, as a significant element in the French historical experience. The same French context, finally, helps us understand why nostalgia would itself later shift into lower gear, becoming a more purely sentimental experience. Dodman deserves real credit for laying out nostalgia's story, with a creative mix of description and analysis.

And one final question, that goes beyond the Dodman study but builds on the importance of nostalgia in modern history. Dodman's account, like that of Susan Matt on American

homesickness or Gary Cross on the trivial though pervasive use of the emotion in mature consumer culture [3], correctly suggests a reduction in the historical significance of nostalgia by the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries. The phenomenon changed shape. But are we encountering yet another iteration of nostalgia in the early twenty-first century, not to be sure as disease but as motivation for powerful, arguably counterproductive, political efforts to recapture a set of simpler national pasts? Is nostalgia now intensifying again, and becoming a bit of a political malady in the process?

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NOTES

[1] Joan Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: The History of Anorexia Nervosa* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995); Edward Shorter, "Paralysis: The Rise and Fall of a 'Hysterical' Symptom," *Journal of Social History* 19 (4) (1986): 549-582.

[2] Susan Matt, *Homesickness: An American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[3] Matt, *Homesickness*; Gary Cross, *Consumer Nostalgia: Memory in the Age of Fast Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

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