
H-France Review Vol. 11 (August 2011), No. 177

Brian Joseph Martin, *Napoleonic Friendship: Military Fraternity, Intimacy & Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century France*. Durham, N.H.: University of New Hampshire Press, 2011; published by University Press of New England. xvii + 379 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$39.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN: 978-1-58465-956-3.

Review by Michael J. Hughes, Iona College.

The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars are finally getting the attention that they deserve. Over the last decade during the bicentennial of Napoleon's reign, an impressive array of scholars including David A. Bell, Alan Forrest, Karen Hagemann, Natalie Petiteau, and Thierry Lentz have been spearheading a movement to re-evaluate their nature and broader historical impact. Brian Joseph Martin contributes to this ongoing campaign by exploring the literary and sexual legacy of the conflicts that convulsed Europe between 1792 and 1815.

In pursuit of this project, Martin develops Michel Foucault's tentative theories about the origins of homosexuality. Foucault contemplated writing a history of the French army shortly before his death because he believed that it was the source of modern gay relationships between men. He conceived these relations as emotional rather than erotic partnerships and redefined homosexual relationships as a form of male companionship based on mutual affection, support, and intimacy. According to Foucault, these bonds first arose in the military during the nineteenth century for it was the only social space in which love between men was not only permissible, but encouraged. Eventually, the mass mobilization of French manhood for World War I and the partnerships forged in the fires of trench warfare led to recognition and acceptance of the deep, emotional relationships among men that characterized twentieth-century homosexuality.

In many ways, *Napoleonic Friendship* is the postmodern military history that Foucault never wrote. Martin applies Foucault's definition of male homosexuality and his historical framework to the study of nineteenth-century military memoirs and war literature to reveal the evolution of gay relationships in modern France. He contends that the military reforms of the French Revolution and the experiences of the Napoleonic Wars generated a new kind of masculine relationship that he labels Napoleonic friendship. This model rested upon intimate partnerships between soldiers built on reciprocal affection and care that were cemented through shared suffering in the army. Martin proposes that the persistence and development of Napoleonic friendship among French troops and in military literature across the nineteenth century culminated in the appearance of homosexual soldiers and overt homoeroticism in the literary texts written about the First World War.

Fighting men, of course, formed attachments to one another long before the Great War. Martin's story begins with a discussion of ancient and medieval works such as the *Iliad* and *The Song of Roland* where warriors like Achilles and the Carolingian knight Roland expressed profound devotion and love toward their slain companions-in-arms Patroclus and Olivier. While the bonds that existed among Napoleon's *grognards* resembled these early military friendships, Martin argues that the French Revolution created a new and fundamentally different kind of relationship between soldiers. The military festivals of the French Revolution, the journalism of Camille Desmoulins, and the art of Jacques-Louis David

established fraternity as a leading principle of the Revolution. Revolutionary fraternity possessed strong military associations and envisioned all Frenchmen as a brotherhood of equals who were united in defense of the nation, and who owed one another respect and support. Unity also went beyond verbal commitments, and the defenders of France were encouraged to display physical affection toward their armed brethren through fraternal embraces. These trends, Martin asserts, then inspired a series of military reforms in recruitment, promotion, integration, and training that transformed the French army. The inequalities and abuse that characterized relationships between aristocratic officers and common soldiers in the Royal army disappeared. A new spirit of camaraderie founded on Revolutionary fraternity bound together soldiers of all ranks and rendered the military units of the Republic more cohesive and effective in combat.

While Martin acknowledges that Napoleonic officials abandoned the fraternal rhetoric of the Revolution, he maintains that these changes created the structural and ideological conditions that produced Napoleonic friendship in the Grande Armée. Napoleon himself and the intense, personal relationships that he formed with subordinates such as Marshal Jean Lannes, General Gérard Christophe Duroc, and General Jean-Andoche Junot represented the leading examples of this new type of military companionship. Martin claims that the grief that the Emperor displayed at the deaths of Lannes and Duroc and Junot's obsession with Napoleon reflected three kinds of intimacy between soldiers that distinguished Napoleonic friendship: lateral relationships between soldiers of comparable rank, the compassion of leaders for their men, and the devotion of soldiers toward their superiors. Descending down the military hierarchy, Martin further subdivides horizontal partnerships among soldiers into four categories. Through an analysis of the memoirs of General Marcellin de Marbot, Captain Jean-Roch Coignet, and Sergeant François Bourgogne, he explains that Napoleonic friendship in the ranks revolved around the individual's ties with *camarades de lit* or bedfellows, *intimes amis* or trusted buddies, *pays* or hometown friends, and mentors. These relationships became especially important in the waning years of the Empire. They provided French soldiers who had lost their faith in Napoleon with the physical and emotional support that they needed to survive disasters like the Peninsular War and the Russian Campaign.

The first third of Martin's book combines history and literary analysis to outline the origins and characteristics of Napoleonic friendship. The remaining two sections are dominated by literary criticism as its author seeks to prove that the military partnerships that emerged under the First Empire continued to pervade French war literature after its fall. This endeavor starts with Stendhal, a veteran himself, whose characters Julien Sorel and Fabrice del Dongo in *The Red and the Black* and *The Charterhouse of Parma* figure as Napoleonic "wannabes" and "latecomers." Martin argues that both longed to experience military life and companionship with fellow soldiers. Neither, however, fully realized this dream because of Napoleon's defeat and the political, social, and economic realities of the Restoration. Yet despite the failures of Sorel and del Dongo, they kept the memory of Napoleonic friendship alive at Waterloo and in its aftermath. From Stendhal, Martin turns to Victor Hugo and *Les Misérables*. Hugo's Napoleonic friends included Colonel Pontmercy and Sergeant Thénardier, their sons Marius and Gavroche, and even the plaster elephant constructed at the Place de la Bastille during Napoleon's reign. Pontmercy retained a commitment to his fellow soldiers even though he was mistreated by Thénardier after the latter saved him from the grave at Waterloo. Martin portrays their offspring as a new generation of combatants whose devotion to their comrades on the barricades of Paris embodied the loyalty and self-sacrifice of Napoleon's *grogards* and the Revolution's brothers-in-arms.

The suffering of veterans such as Colonel Pontmercy was even more pronounced in *The Human Comedy* of Honoré de Balzac, which receives more attention in *Napoleonic Friendship* than any other text. Martin maintains that Balzac illustrated the plight of ex-Napoleonic soldiers during the Restoration and July Monarchy. Denied adequate pay, the prospect of marriage, and public respect by governments that feared and mistrusted them, the Empire's veterans relied on the relationships that they formed with one

another for comfort and material support. Many became close bachelor pairs who lived out the remainder of their lives together. Balzac, who consulted veterans to ensure the accuracy of his writing, highlighted the hardships of Napoleon's former soldiers and told the story of these veteran couples through characters like Major Hulot, Colonel Chabert, Colonel Bridau, Gondrin and Goguelat, and Major Genestas and Dr. Benassis.

Although intimate, Balzac's soldier pairs were united in homosocial rather than homosexual relationships. Yet according to Martin, Napoleonic friendships began to exhibit an erotic character in the neo-Napoleonic literature that appeared after the Second Empire. He identifies *The Debacle* by Émile Zola as the key text in this development. Zola's characters Jean Macquart and Maurice Levasseur forged a powerful bond through the shared experiences of campaign life, combat, and imprisonment during the Franco-Prussian War. Their love for one another eventually reached such intensity that they engaged in passionate kisses. The fully homosexual soldiers who later fought in World War I, such as Robert de Saint-Loup from Marcel Proust's novel *Time Regained*, did far more than kiss. Martin concludes his study with the homoerotic literature of the Great War. He emphasizes that the military and literary traditions of Napoleonic friendship, the scientific investigation of a gay military subculture in the late nineteenth-century, military preparations for renewed conflict with Germany, and the companionship of the trenches combined to finally allow men such as Saint-Loup to come out of the closet. They could start to openly express both their emotional and physical love for their fellow soldiers.

Martin's history of military companionship ascribes too much power to Revolutionary fraternity. It portrays this ideal as the primary source of the Revolution's military reforms and the close partnerships between soldiers in the armies of the Republic and the Empire. The Revolutionaries' vision of brotherhood certainly played a substantial role in their effort to transform the French army, but Martin reduces the complex mixture of political, cultural, social, and military factors involved in this operation to this one variable. More significantly, he fails to account for the internal dynamics within military units that tend to create solidarity among their members. Since the Second World War, military historians, social scientists, and military professionals have recognized that soldiers normally establish strong bonds of loyalty to a small group of comrades with whom they live and fight. These bands are known as primary groups, and they usually exert a powerful influence over the motivation of combatants. Such groups existed within the armies of Revolutionary and Napoleonic France, as well as their predecessors and opponents. They would have forged the lateral relationships between soldiers to which Martin attaches so much value regardless of Revolutionary fraternity or the military changes it influenced. Napoleon's red-coated foes, in fact, represent the best example of this tendency. Edward J. Coss's research demonstrates that British soldiers were intensely devoted to the men in their mess units. The latter became surrogate families for soldiers who learned to depend on them for food, protection, and comfort in the difficult conditions of the Peninsular War.[1] These Napoleonic friendships, which so closely resembled those in the French army, coalesced independently of Revolutionary fraternity. Consequently, there is every reason to believe that horizontal Napoleonic friendship among the *grogards* owed as much or more to primary group loyalties than the Revolution's concept of brotherhood. The close vertical relationships between officers and soldiers in the Grande Armée were new, and here, Martin's arguments about Revolutionary fraternity hold more weight.

His treatment of Napoleonic veterans also recycles traditional interpretations that have been challenged in more recent historiography. The most striking omission in Martin's book is the absence of Natalie Petiteau's work. Petiteau reveals that ex-Imperial soldiers did not constitute an army of disgruntled and destitute bachelors. After an initial period of hardship during the Restoration, most re-integrated successfully into civilian society where they secured decent jobs, got married, and became valued members of their communities.[2] To be fair to Martin, the body of scholarship on the Napoleonic era has reached avalanche proportions over the last decade, and it would have been impossible for him to consult it all. Moreover, he set himself the unenviable task of straddling several academic disciplines and their diverse literatures, and he covers an admirable amount of this material. Still, Petiteau's book on

veterans was published eight years ago and received considerable attention in scholarly circles, including H-France.[3] In addition, it raises fundamental questions about the historical significance of the soldier couples that occupy such a central place in Martin's narrative. He therefore should have addressed it and the discrepancy between the literary and historical records that Petiteau highlights.

Nevertheless, Martin's book represents a worthy addition to the scholarly literature on the Napoleonic era. Many historians familiar with the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars are well aware of Napoleon's friendships with favored subordinates and that French soldiers relied on one another to endure the dangers and hardships that they faced. Martin, however, reveals the long-term significance of these relationships, and this contribution is an important innovation. He succeeds in demonstrating that the partnerships established in the Grande Armée became a cultural model that continued to shape relations between soldiers as well as the historical and literary memory of the Napoleonic Wars. Even if the soldier-couples immortalized by Balzac were more legend than reality, legends have the power to mold reality. In his introduction, Martin briefly explains that French military theorists increasingly recognized that relationships between soldiers affected their combat performance, but his interest in military affairs after 1815 remains largely confined to war literature. Hopefully, he will inspire other scholars to investigate the legend of Napoleonic friendship within the French army, and its impact on military policy and practice in modern France.

The value of Martin's book also lies in its implications for the history of masculinity and homosexuality. The study of war and masculinity is a growing field, but relatively few scholars have explored the links between the military and manhood. Martin breaks new ground by demonstrating how intense, emotional ties with other men constituted a key component of military masculinity in modern France. He also proves that intimate partnerships within the military had a profound effect on the vision of French manhood communicated by some of the most celebrated novels of the nineteenth and twentieth century. In doing so, Martin's work likewise challenges us to rethink our understanding of male homosexuality. It adds an affective dimension to homosexual relationships that future scholarship will need to address and makes a thought-provoking case for the origins of modern gay relationships in the most unexpected and most macho of places, the military.

Notes

[1] Edward J. Coss, *All for the King's Shilling: The British Soldier Under Wellington, 1808-1814* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010).

[2] Natalie Petiteau, *Lendemain d'Empire. les soldats de Napoléon dans la France du XIXe siècle* (Paris: Boutique de l'histoire, 2003).

[3] Robert S. Alexander, review of Natalie Petiteau, *Lendemain d'Empire. Les soldats de Napoléon dans la France du XIXe siècle*, *H-France Review* Vol. 4 (September 2004), No. 87.

Michael J. Hughes
Iona College
mjhughes@iona.edu

Copyright © 2011 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print

form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172