

Smith, Leonard V.: *The Embattled Self. French Soldiers' Testimony of the Great War*. Ithaca. London: Cornell University Press 2007. ISBN: 978-0-8014-4523-1; 210 S.

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Marc Bloch, the Great War soldier, medieval historian and French Resistance martyr, wrote of his first experience of combat that „my recollections of that day are not altogether precise. Above all they are poorly articulated, a discontinuous series of images, vivid in themselves but badly arranged“ (p. 48). „The Embattled Self“ is an exploration of both how French soldier-writers' narratives of the Great War came to be formed from these disjointed memories, and what the framing of these narratives and the „moral“ of their stories tell us of these soldiers' identities. A great strength of Leonard Smith's approach is that unlike Eric Leed and (to some extent) Paul Fussell, he acknowledges that narratives are created and change over time and engages with the mutual construction of narrative and narrator.¹ Indeed the starting point of the book is the existence of competing narratives and those that contradict the modern 'received' version of the war as a tragedy and its participants as victims (pp. 1-7). Furthermore he also acknowledges the restrictions of his chosen field of investigation as a select and self-selecting group of published authors, as compared with Leed's generalised conclusions of all soldiers' identities and Fussell's description of Oxford student C.S. Lewis as a „representative young man of the period“.² Though this consciousness of diversity and limitations is a strength of his methodology, the same factors limits the boundaries of Smith's conclusions as to soldiers' self-image to those of his published witnesses from which intimations may be proposed about soldiers' identities beyond this group (especially where the writers commented on the thoughts of common soldiers). Nonetheless, he creates a compelling picture of the changing nature of this self-image, from a wartime and immediate post-war „genre of consent“ to the later disillusionment so often taken for granted as „the“ narrative of the war. In a rather circular man-

ner, of course, Smith creates this narrative of change from „consent“ to disillusion himself, and it is to his credit that he acknowledges both this fact (p. 202) and the impossibility of proving absolutely his thesis from these literary sources (p. 108).

Smith sets out two major parts of this study of soldiers' published testimony. He refers to the writers as „witnesses“ or „témoins“ following the lead of French soldier, author and critic Jean Norton Cru, the inspiration for Smith's study (p. ix-x). Cru was, in his books published in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the first who had dealt with the constructed nature of the narratives and the shortcomings of the three-part „rites of passage“ model in encapsulating the experience of modern war. Here mobilisation and the baptism of fire form the first two stages (the situation and the crisis or 'liminal' stage) and Smith differs from Leed in placing the unresolved element not in the liminal but in the final „reincorporation“ or resolution stage. These first two stages, and particularly the crisis, Smith argues, are characterised by „consent“ as a means by which soldier-writers and their comrades could come to terms with what was going on around them. The difficulty comes, in this model, at the end of the war or in the resolution stage, as consent-narratives „stop, but by definition do not 'end' in the sense of containing closure or a moral.“ (p. 138) The remainder of Smith's study outlines his own narrative of the changes to the narrative of the war that occurred in the interwar years, as they morphed into the image of the First World War, and war in general, as a tragedy or trauma.

Why soldiers fought on to the finish in the Great War is the subject of heated debate among French historians, one in which Smith argues on the side of „consent“ as the characterisation of soldiers' wartime identities.³

¹ Leed, Eric, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I*, Cambridge 1979; Fussell, Paul, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Oxford 1975. Fussell does acknowledge the influence of literature on memoirs of the war, particularly Robert Graves' conscious aim to write a profitable narrative.

² Fussell, *The Great War*, p. 54.

³ Smith gives a good and critical, if naturally sympathetic, outline of the 'consent' debate in this book at the start of Chapter 3, and his: *The „Culture de Guerre“*

This thesis posits that men fought willingly for Third-Republic France, in which they were integral parts and which was an integral part of them, and which allowed for the existence of simultaneous competing versions of 'France', according to the plurality of political opinions among the French citizens who imagined it (p. 125). More broadly the argument sees the presence of a „war culture“ and soldiers' (and civilians') immersion in it as creating an increased commitment to violence and victory as the war progressed, the prewar flexibility in images of „France“ allowing for a multiplicity of reasons to fight for it and hopes for what the war might achieve, including an end to war itself (p. 126). One problem can be seen here in that, as Smith notes, „consent“ is not a provable state of soldiers' identity but is rather something that can be shown as being present in certain examples on which he draws. Although he covers a variety of forms of „consent“-based depictions (the strength of the argument being that it can incorporate a variety of views), one wonders whether they were perhaps rather part of a wider plurality of viewpoints or versions of the war, which became whittled down with time into the disillusionment that characterised later works and dominates popular memory (as Dan Todman has shown in terms of the narrowing of British public memory of and discourse on the war⁴).

Here we have one great problem with the study of the experience of the First World War (and indeed of much of its conduct): the sheer volume of evidence, and indeed scholarship. As in the case of „genre of consent“, this makes many theories on soldiers (and civilians') experiences and identities supportable but never conclusive, as evidence or an argument can almost always be produced to the contrary. Equally, the same evidence used here might be wielded by others in support of versions of soldiers' identities other than „consent“; for instance Smith notes that his interpretation of Henri Barbusse's „Le Feu“ differs from that of other scholars (pp. 69-72, 201). Smith is canny enough to acknowledge this and is clear that his conclusions are based on a specific set of evidence and that they are themselves a narrative, created by him. What results is a convincing and very interest-

ing depiction of the genesis and evolution of Great War testimony, and a carefully argued proposition as to soldiers' wartime identity based on this evidence. While the argument will be more convincing to those who accept the „consent“ thesis, this is nonetheless a very good in-depth look at soldiers' narratives of the war and one can only hope that it will join, if not supersede, those of Leed and Fussell as one of the major studies of Great War literature as historical evidence.

HistLit 2008-3-115 / Stuart Hallifax über Smith, Leonard V.: *The Embattled Self. French Soldiers' Testimony of the Great War*. Ithaca. London 2007, in: H-Soz-Kult 15.08.2008.

and French Historiography of the Great War of 1914-1918, in: *History Compass*, 5, 6 (2007) p. 1968-1979; see also Jay Winter, *Unfriendly Fire* in: *The Times Literary Supplement*, 14.6.2006.

⁴ Dan Todman, in his *The Great War: Myth and Memory*, London 2005, differs from other writers in seeing this narrowing as a continuous process rather than simply occurring in stages around 1930 and in the early 1960s.