

***Living on the Western Front: Annals and Stories, 1914-1919.* By Chris Ward.**

Bloomsbury Publishing. 2013. vi + 290 pp. £22.99.

Numerous books have been written about the Western Front, but Chris Ward's is not like any other. Determined to shake off the limitations of narrative structure, the author has compiled a hybrid between a medieval chronicle and a postmodern hypertext. The outcome is a deliberate patchwork; a challenge to the historian's traditional effort to impose in the process of writing a structure on the chaos of historical traces and sources. To be sure, Ward is hardly the first person to experiment with a new style of historical writing. He refers to Sven Lindqvist's meditative *A History of Bombing* (2001) as a source of inspiration. But Walter Kempowski's *Echolot* project (1993-2005) of assembling snippets from the past in chronological order also springs to mind. Neither Lindqvist nor Kempowski are conventional historians, and Ward is a scholar based in a department of Slavonic studies. His attempt to escape from the structures of emplotment and 'upset realist expectations' has proved – he concedes – ultimately impossible, for 'every sentence is a kind of narrative' (p. 2). Unsurprisingly, there is no index to round this unconventional book off, although it includes an appendix containing five maps (didactically valuable, but rather at odds with the radical spirit of the book).

Ward's annals of the war begin on Monday, 14 July 1914 and conclude on Saturday, 3 May 1919. In between, there are entries (or rather 'narremes') for landmark dates such as 1 July 1916 and 11 November 1918, but most of the 107 dates are chosen seemingly at random. Ward invites his reader to peruse his book in three possible ways: as a chronicle from cover to cover; as a collection of stand-alone vignettes; or – and that is the most intriguing approach – as an anthology of stories. There are 12 stories running through this book, ranging from experiences ('Colour, Sound & Smell'; 'Aspects of Identity') to landscapes ('Fauna'; 'Flora') and peoples ('Enemy'; 'Natives'). For instance, following the storyline of 'Ease & Privacy' one starts at entry 13 (Monday, 26 April 1915) and jumps from there to entry 21 (Thursday, 16 September 1915) and then to five further entries before finishing at entry 100 (Sunday, 29 September 1918). The individual 'narremes' are mostly micro-historical sketches, zooming in on the experiences of individual participants in the war on the Western Front. The primary source basis for this is the rich collection of ego-documents held at the Imperial War Museum. In addition, Ward draws on British official histories published in the inter-war years to throw in the odd macro-historical data. However, one looks in vain for Belgian, French or German primary sources.

Trendy in form, this book is old-fashioned in content. While historians of the Great War are increasingly framing their work in terms of transnational and global history, Ward's perspective on the Western Front is Anglo-centric to the extreme. British officers and soldiers are cited at great length, yet the Belgian and French local populations remain totally silent. 'The more I see of the French the less I think of them' (p. 25) wrote one British nurse; another correspondent considered them filthy and superstitious. But how did French farmers or Belgian townspeople perceive the British who had come to their defence? After reading Ward's book we are none the wiser. Ward has his reasons for marginalising, indeed silencing, what he calls 'the natives': they had, apparently, no place in 'Befland'. Ward has invented the term

'Befland' to designate the way in which the British, supposedly, colonised the Western Front and its rear area, and soldiers are referred to as 'Beflanders', 'immigrants', 'settlers' or 'zone dwellers'.

No doubt, the British Expeditionary Force had a strong presence in northern France and Belgium; buildings were taken over or newly erected; the army had to be supplied with food stuffs; and soldiers expected entertainments such as cinemas; and so on. But did all this amount to the establishment of a 'colony' or 'settlement' (two terms Ward uses interchangeably)? There are two problems with the idea of 'Befland'. Firstly, it is grossly insensitive to the war experience of the 'natives'; and, secondly, it is based on a misunderstanding of why the British were at the Somme or Ypres. There is little evidence to suggest that the soldiers saw their deployment at the Western Front as anything other than a temporary upheaval of their civilian existence. Ward's hypothesis runs counter to a vast amount of secondary literature which has argued that the British soldier remained at heart a civilian in uniform. Wartime popular culture was pervaded by a nostalgic longing for the home, which Tommy never really left but brought with him in his imagination. Soldiers adapted to life at the Western Front, but they did not 'settle' there. Even more puzzling is Ward's suggestion of a 'New Befland' in the occupied Rhineland in the aftermath of the war.

In sum, this is an unorthodox book. Conventional readers who want 'certainties about uncertainties' (p. 2) will be disappointed, but more adventurous minds might enjoy ploughing through Ward's interesting collection of annals and stories from the Western Front. They should be warned, though, that *Living on the Western Front* comes close to a Little Englander's guide to the Western Front. Certainly, this is not a boring book.

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