

Martyn Lyons. *The Writing Culture of Ordinary People in Europe, c.1860—1920*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 292 S. ISBN 978-1-107-01889-1.

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M. Lyons: The Writing Culture of Ordinary People in Europe, c.1860-1920

The study under review is being marketed by Cambridge University Press with a rather idiosyncratic understanding of the term ‘Europe’. Instead of covering the social and cultural complexity of the continent, Martyn Lyons is limiting his investigation to the Romanic south-west of Europe: Italy, France, and Spain. This is, of course, entirely legitimate (if only for linguistic reasons), but the reader needs to be prepared for the limitations of this study sailing under a somewhat grandiloquent title. The reviewer suspects that he may not be the only academic suffering from repeated frustration at the deliberate strategy of publishing houses to mislabel their products for the purpose of greater ‘market impact’. Usually, subtitles help to sort out the mess caused by marketing strategies, but the publisher decided not to provide any clarification. This is simply bad practice, and the price tag attached to the book does not make things any better.

The book consists of four major parts (divided, in turn, into a total of 12 short chapters), the first of which is a lengthy introduction into Lyons’ approach and sources. He adheres to what he calls a “new history from below” (pp. 14–8) which allegedly is shifting attention from social structures and collective identities towards the voices of individuals and re-establishes them at the heart of a new understanding of historical agency. What is significant, though, is the limitation of Lyons’ historiographical awareness to the English-speaking world and southwestern Europe. While this is in itself no small achievement, German scholars will be intrigued by the absence of decades of their own contributions to the field which tend to point in exactly the opposite direction: from the

sentimental obsession with the individual during earlier periods of an “old history from below” towards renewed and critical conceptualizations of a “new social and cultural history” of popular writing during recent decades. Clearly, a better international integration of methods and approaches is still outstanding. What follows is a highly personal tour of archives and materials which Lyons retrieved from public and independent collections in France, Spain, and Italy. Parts of this introduction are extremely well-written, as they come across as entertaining journalistic prose, and the author does not shy away from occasional indiscretions if they serve the purpose of supporting his narrative of an academic’s quest for lost treasures in sometimes unusual institutional and physical surroundings. The most interesting part of these first 70 pages is Lyons’ demonstration of the potential impact of literary models on popular writing cultures, though the position of this short chapter before the more empirical main body of the book can be puzzling. Still, the extent to which Lyons is able to demonstrate the power of literary ambition mainly in Italian materials is fascinating and only leaves the reader with the question whether the author implies any national peculiarity here.

The following 150 pages contain three national case studies from France, Italy, and Spain, neatly divided into several sub-chapters each. While in the case of France and Italy the author relies mainly on soldiers’ letters written during the First World War, he uses the economically motivated migration from Spain to Latin America as a comparable case of communication among ‘ordinary people’ separated by historical circumstance. Even

though Lyons occasionally introduces a wider range of materials that point towards the limitations of popular literacy and the malleability of genre and authorship in popular writing, this main part is about letter writing. While Lyons demonstrates that he is clearly aware of the manifold social and cultural complications of popular literacy, it can appear that he repeatedly falls back on simply telling, for example, the story of the war experience from soldiers' letters without much concern for the difficulties of the medium. The author often struggles to apply his precise and critical methodological insight to his own analysis of his primary materials – the dangers of uncritical popular realism are not entirely held in check. However, the comparative angle between the Italian and the French case is cleverly chosen: Lyons juxtaposes popular attitudes towards the 'lost provinces' of Alsace and the Trentino, but again, the impression persists that the interpretation here rests on what soldiers wrote about their encounter with those provinces, and not so much on how they wrote it.

The strongest moments of the book occur when the medium of popular writing itself becomes the centre of attention and thereby transparent: the problem of tactical writing is a persistent and enlightening ingredient of Lyons' analysis when the issue of the intended readership of popular writing takes centre stage: ranging from trustworthy individuals (such as siblings) to parental authority which also often implied whole families if not whole villages as an audience. Occasionally, the material allows insights into social power relations and their impact on popular writing, as in the case of a soldier discussing the issue of abortion with his distant wife or when Spanish emigrants were presenting their presumed economic successes in the New World tactically to respond to expectations at home or were playing down their achievements in order not to attract more family members to follow their path. Implicitly, Lyons can untangle complex processes of contemporary verbalisations of gender, generation, and economic experience, and it is this interpretative attitude which would have served the whole book

well. A final insightful chapter on 'memory books' and their function for the formation of subjectivity displays the potential of such a critical approach, but its complete isolation from the rest of the main body of this book illustrates rather neatly a relative lack of empirical focus and methodological coherence that characterizes this study throughout.

In his conclusion, Lyons is trying to avoid these problems by trying to balance his notion of 'popular writing' in between a variety of genres, as well as national and social differences. One of his main arguments relating to the limitations of 'national' perspectives and his scepticism against the assumption of a 'nationalisation' of popular sentiment and culture since the late 19th century is entirely legitimate but hardly ground-breaking. Instead, we are now more interested in mechanisms of nationalisation which can appear harmless at first sight, such as the emphasis on regionalisms or the implicit linguistic privatization of political circumstances (and vice versa). Lyons' distrust in microhistorical approaches raises little more than the question of their representativeness, and his critical embrace of a "linguistic turn from below" breathes the innovative air of the 1990s. What is lacking is a clearer decision whether Lyons intends to emancipate popular authors (and their audiences) from contemporary discourses and narratives or whether he wants to analyse the sometimes inadvertent ways in which they themselves produced them in the first place. He seems to believe that it is a mark of respect to take their writings seriously, but tends to fail to acknowledge that their writings are also the sediments of communicative entrapments – and of the contemporary circumstances in which 'ordinary people' actively operated such mechanisms of discursive entrapment. It can equally be a mark of respect for the contemporaries to try and untangle their linguistic submission to convention, power, and cultural hegemonies. What matters, after all, is not just to understand what ordinary people did with language but, even more importantly, what language did to ordinary people.

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