Sarah Farmer. *Martyred Village: Commemorating the 1944 Massacre at Oradour-sur-Glane.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. xvii + 300 pp. $24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-21186-5.

Reviewed by Jay Winter

Published on H-France (March, 2000)

This book is an updated edition of the same author's French publication of 1994 on the SS massacre of hundreds of civilians in the sleepy Limousin village of Oradour. It marries first name familiarity with the survivors of the atrocity with a keen appreciation of the "memory boom" in recent historical studies. The result is an account of commemoration firmly rooted in the local soil of this region; by decentring the analysis, the author is able to escape many facile "truths" about *la memoire collective.* In Farmer's book, the collective in question is palpable; it lived in a certain place, was smashed at a certain time; and has constructed its own narrative of victimhood, powerful in and of itself, but insufficiently strong to persuade the political elite of their version of events.

In fact, Farmer's book shows the dangers of a national approach to the history of commemoration precisely by confronting the victims' view of events with national political imperatives of reconciliation and pardon. The men convicted of this completely unprovoked act of barbarism were pardoned, first by an act of the French National Assembly revoking the principle of collective responsibility for atrocities in the case of Alsatians, and then by the president of the State himself. Here the nation is juxtaposed to the local, but it is wise to avoid adopting a populist reading of the human value of remembering versus the political value of forgetting. Forgetting is a local commodity too, one that the mouldering ruins of the destroyed town illustrate in a romantic, pastoral way.

There are particularly effective chapters on the events leading to the massacre, on attempts to make sense of it at the time, of the difficulties attending the trial of the perpetrators, and of the awkwardness attending decisions as to the rebuilding of the town to the west of the ruins. Here Farmer's touch is sound on questions of local politics and the national debate over the nature of victimhood and martyrdom.

In other ways, though, this book leaves unresolved many of the questions it raises. Is it true, as Farmer states, that the survivors have been "the historians of their own experience" (p. 213)? She claims that when they die off, other historians and storytellers will take over their story. To be

sure, the narratives of victims are essential elements of history, but are the tellers of these narratives historians? Surely not. This issue requires much more considered thought than Farmer gives it here; it is central to the efflorescence of witness literature in the last twenty years. If Rigoberta Menchu is an historian, then the victims' tale lies somewhere between history and fiction, and is all the more valuable for that. Witnesses are the last people to write history, since their own terrified memories are unlikely to withstand the test of scrutiny against other kinds of documentation. Cognitive psychologists have shown that first person witnessing is profoundly affected by terror; memory traces cannot be the same among those passing through the horrors of events like those of Oradour-sur-Glane, and among those of us lucky enough to be spared. It would have been good to have her views on the now abundant literature on traumatic memory and its discursive forms. These comments would have deepened what is an interesting and well-told narrative; but we are left largely on the surface of these difficult matters. Here is one among a number of instances where Farmer, a sensitive and informed observer, with experience of television presentation alongside rigorous historical writing, offers incomplete judgments to very hard problems. It is to be hoped that she will soon turn her talents to addressing these questions about the intersection of history and memory, questions which her story poses, but in no sense answers.

Another example of the unsatisfactory nature of her argument is her account of the "false" monument of Dr. Desourteaux's car. The wrong car has been preserved in the Oradour ruins, but the issue is not the post-modernist conflation of the artificial and the real, as Farmer suggests (p. 201), but rather the impossibility of "realism" of any kind to convey what happened. In such cases as the mass murder of Oradour, we have reached the limits of language. One burned out car can certainly suggest catastrophe; the fact that it was not driven by the man who died in the incident is both important and beside the point. Normal life was frozen by the murderers; or rather it was incinerated. That is all that we can say about the incident, and the car says it. Having the "authentic" one there would make no difference at all.

Pseudo-realism is a great enemy of historical museums, and it is to be hoped that the new Centre de la memoire at Oradour will suggest rather than describe the indescribable. Sarah Farmer has taken us some of the way into this conundrum; her story is well told and well researched. But it raises issues about the limits of representation, which go beyond this book, and probably beyond the tools available to our profession itself. Silence and a sense of humility may be our only refuge, and what is the problem in that?

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Citation: Jay Winter. Review of Farmer, Sarah. *Martyred Village: Commemorating the 1944 Massacre at Oradour-sur-Glane.* H-France, H-Net Reviews. March, 2000.

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