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Race, Empire and First World War Writing

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Race, Empire and First World War Writing. Edited by Santanu Das. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 352pp. \$95.00 cloth.

With the one-hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of World War I approaching, it would be easy to assume that everything there is to be known and said about the conflict has seen the light of day. But Santanu Das's excellent new essay collection has the effect of unlocking a hidden door in the vast illuminated library of World War I research. Following the lead of Jay Winter's groundbreaking 1995 study *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, scholars of the war have in recent years emphasized a comparative historical approach in order to counteract the distortions of nationalist mythmaking. However, "comparative" has still primarily meant European; widening that perspective to a genuinely international one, as this book demonstrates, brings about a dizzying sense that the war about which we think we know everything has only just begun to reveal its secrets.

The book is divided into three parts, ordered by the evidence available. The first, "Voices and Experiences," tells the stories of participants who rarely appear in conventional histories: Chinese indentured laborers, East African askari, and recruits from the French colonies in Vietnam and Senegal. In Part Two, "Perceptions and Proximities," the essays explore moments of "first contact" between a range of white European civilians and non-white soldiers and workers, at a moment of sudden and extraordinary expansion in the awareness of the lives of others. In the final section, "Nationalism, Memory, and Literature," the authors work to recalibrate more familiar national histories of the war, from Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, and the United States, to account for the contributions of non-white (or non-

Protestant) participants. Intimate personal narratives, combined with often-incomplete statistical overviews, challenge the reader to forge a connected picture from a series of tantalizing images. Das's introduction begins with a reproduction of a diary page, on which an Indian soldier recorded a list of Urdu words and their English translations (including 'blanket,' 'hungry,' and 'testacies [sic]'). Later chapters continue to provide evocative glimpses of the true diversity of World War One experiences: the pre-departure parades of the Maori battalion Te Hokowhitu A Tu as they leave New Zealand for Egypt, rowdy Australian troops disgracing their superiors in the streets of Colombo, Cape Town, and other ports, and a spike in the birth rate in a Flemish backwater suddenly home to thousands of foreign workers.

Although in general, as Das writes, the non-white soldier was a "charged figure," and European attitudes combined "racism, exoticism, fear, and anxiety," prolonged contact with a diversity of racial "others" often generated more nuanced attitudes (18). In his essay "Representing Otherness," Christian Roller writes that German propaganda protested the Allies' use of colonial troops as "a flagrant breach of white solidarity" and an unfair, uncivilized tactic, yet letters from German soldiers also showed "curiosity and an exoticist attitude" (129,131). These accounts hardly humanized the Indian and African troops, and rarely distinguished between different ethnic groups, but they did show an acceptance of these groups' presence as part of the daily experience of the war. Although French and British soldiers tended to view their own non-white troops more positively, their letters, diaries and memoirs still exhibited a mixture of curiosity, sympathy, exoticism, and infantilism, while allegations of the savagery of African soldiers in particular took tenacious hold, even among generally skeptical and sympathetic witnesses. As Paul J. Bailey observes in his essay on Chinese indentured labor in wartime France, there is some evidence from the French and British authorities as to how these workers were perceived and treated, but a fully textured story of the Chinese experience is missing: a "lacuna" in European war histories, and in histories of modern China, "a historical black hole" (37). Any interpretation of the Chinese workers' wartime experiences therefore requires an astute reading of imperial sources. These often exhibit condescending attitudes toward colonial laborers and soldiers in order to mask the deep-rooted fear among European authorities, that they could be judged barbarous or uncivilized by the very groups whose barbarity they strenuously asserted as fact.

Amid these pervasive prejudices, the voices of African and Indian troops break through with particular force. Michelle Moyd's striking essay on the experience of the askari (Arabic/Kiswahili for 'soldier') in German East Africa immediately and evocatively establishes a sense of the cultural distance between this isolated garrison and the capital cities of Europe:

The First World War initially came to East Africa as a rumour. Mzee Ali, a senior askari, recalled how he first heard in late 1914 of the "great and terrible war" that would soon engulf German East Africa: "From the talk around the campfires we knew this was to be no ordinary

war." (90)

The nature of this fighting -- in mobile caravans, with the askari accompanied by women, children, and servants -- is so different from the mud, blood and immobility of the Western Front as to barely seem part of the same war.

For most colonial and dominion recruits, however, the war meant a journey to a distant country. That journey was often, as Kimloan Hill writes in her account of Vietnamese war experiences, "the first lesson in disillusionment" (56). Poor sanitation, bad food, and submarine attacks caused high death tolls on board ship, and very little accurate reporting made its way back from Europe to the soldiers' homes. Nguyen-Ai-Quoc, the man who would become known as Ho Chi Minh, claimed in 1925 that all recruits from Vietnam -- who numbered nearly 100,000 -- were conscripted, but Hill notes that fresh archival evidence challenges his claim. Volunteers were likely influenced by a variety of factors -- money, curiosity, a desire to escape -- among which belief in "the cause" was seldom prominent. Even conscripts felt some of the pull of adventure. In his analysis of the oral history of Demba Mboup, a Senegalese griot, Joe Lunn quotes Mboup's recollection of conscription: "I was [excited] knowing I was going to discover new experiences. I didn't know [what awaited me]" (112). A griot was traditionally one of a caste whose role was to describe and celebrate the exploits of the kings they served; Mboup's oral history, conducted in 1982, therefore connects him to both a pre-colonial and a postcolonial identity.

Decorated for his military service and given preferential postwar treatment, yet permanently disabled by shrapnel wounds to his legs, Mboup embodies the decidedly mixed blessing of war service for colonial subjects. A sense of distance crossed is also evident in the other direction: Dominiek Den-dooven's history of rural Flanders notes that "Unlike the inhabitants of the major cities in Great Britain or France, in 1914 the majority of Belgians had never before laid their eyes on a person of a different race" (145).

The contact that required the most intensive rhetorical policing was that between non-white men and European women. The encounters of the men with local sex workers constitute perhaps some of the most intriguing moments of contact, although inevitably almost all such meetings are lost to history. Alison S. Fell's chapter "Nursing the Other" draws on the accounts of French and British nurses of their non-white patients in order to analyze cross-cultural encounters in the similarly intimate site of the hospital ward. White, middle-class women had long been seen as an essential part of the so-called "civilizing mission" of colonialism, but this role was shot through with anxiety, based on the European "fear and fantasy of colonies as sites of sexual abandon and excess" (158). During the war, a revived colonial discourse infantilized non-white troops, especially Africans, West Indians, and Indians, in order to neutralize fears of their sexual voracity. Many nurse memoirs show the success of this strategy, with women recording curiosity and confident authority more

frequently than any erotic disturbance -- although longer contact with colonial soldiers complicated these representations, and at times, "their fascination with and objectification of their patients' bodies [] clearly clashes with the supposedly chaste and maternal gaze of the 'white angel'" (168).

The later chapters of the book give an important insight into the diversity of postwar experiences for individuals and nations. The return home for overseas troops was often long delayed: soldiers from New Zealand did not return for a full year, so that they met an audience less receptive to their experiences. In United States, as Mark Whalan describes, the war had a unique impact on African American veterans, for whom it "gave a conceptual vocabulary to racial conflict" (284). During the war itself, the African American press repeatedly expressed hope that the soldiers' sacrifices would be rewarded with more equitable postwar treatment; those hopes were dashed in the lynchings and race riots that scarred 1919. Yet the veterans' often positive experiences in cosmopolitan European cities, especially Paris, led them to embrace urban culture, and made the war an indirect force driving the Harlem Renaissance. It is perhaps in such underappreciated intersections that the value of such a wide-ranging study is most apparent; in its attempt to "suggest the richness of the subject, encourage dialogue and to make the memory of the war more multiracial and international," this collection offers innumerable lines of inquiry that may lead researchers far beyond the library of World War I (25).

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