



Reading and Writing Communities in the Trenches 1914-1918

Tuesday 22 April 5.30pm

Professor Martyn Lyons History and European Studies, School of Humanities and Languages, University of New South Wales

China in the World Building Fellows Lane (Building 188)



38 years ago Paul Fussell, in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, examined the literary dimensions of the First World War for British combatants. Fussell was primarily concerned with the officer class, a well-read and articulate elite whose war experience did not necessarily reflect that of other ranks. Other historians have sometimes dismissed the literary culture of ordinary soldiers as offering little interest or originality or as being (allegedly) inaccessible. Professor Lyons does not forget the officer elite, but seeks to broaden the focus to include the reading and writing of ordinary people during the war years. In drawing evidence from French and Italian soldiers, he also refers to prisoners of war.

Professor Lyons argues that the trenches constituted a reading community, where soldiers shared similar values, and similar expectations of and appetites for reading. Collective reading, rare among the officer class, was however common amongst the infantry. They devoured newspapers while paradoxically maintaining a healthy cynicism towards their exaggerations and falsehoods. They read for information, for recreation and for clues to understand their own involvement in the war. A few drew on their past reading for literary models which shaped their experience and influenced their own writing.

At the same time, the trenches were also writing communities in which soldiers plunged into an epistolary frenzy of bulimic proportions. They wrote for similar purposes, in similarly laconic prose and they sometimes wrote, just as they read, in common. Reading and writing were closely interconnected and Professor Lyons suggests that we should not treat them in isolation from each other if we seek a rounded vision of cultural history and of literacy practices.

Presented by

Research School of
Humanities & the Arts
and the Australian Centre on
China in the World

Information

E julianne.lamond@anu.edu.au
T 02 6125 4786

This lecture is free and open to the public