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[1]

Love, Death and Writing: Letters from the Italian Front (1915-1918)

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The First World War provides rich sources for the historian of ordinary writings. The trenches produced a massive boulimia of letter-writing, by peasants and workers whose literary capacity has often been underestimated. Italy alone produced 4.000 million items of correspondence during 3 ½ years of conflict, in spite of the fact that about 38 per cent of Italians were officially illiterate on the eve of the war.

In this paper, which will be presented in English, I want to build on my previous work on French soldiers' letters to consider some Italian examples of popular writing. I want to consider the formulaic style of writing adopted by soldiers and the popular language they used, infused with oral and dialectical influences. Most soldiers wrote to wives and girlfriends but, in spite of previous research on this enormous corpus, there has been no specific focus on war letters as love letters. I will consider two case-studies to explore the nature of war correspondence between lovers, and the role of letters in sustaining a sense of personal identity and psychological stability under stress. I will also suggest that they provide unusual insights into gender relationships in this period.

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I was born in London in 1946, and educated at Oxford University. I moved to Sydney in 1977, where I am now Professor in the School of History and Philosophy at the University of New South Wales. I have published on French revolutionary and Napoleonic history, but my main interests have for some time been in the history of reading and writing practices in both Europe and Australia.

As a historian of the book and of reading practices, my main research contribution has been on the history of reading in 19th-century France. At the same time, my work has included an important Australian dimension, especially as Executive Editor of the History of the Book in Australia Project, and in 2008-2010 as President of the Australian Historical Association. I have been a Fellow of the Australian Academy for the Humanities since 1997, and in 2003 I was awarded the Commonwealth of Australia Centenary Medal for services to the Humanities in the study of History.

I have held visiting positions at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris (1995), at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge University (1999), and at the Universidade Federal Fluminense, Niteroi, Brazil (1999). In 2005, I was President of the Organising Committee for the 20th International Congress for Historical Sciences, which convened in Sydney.

I am currently working on ordinary writings in France, Italy and Spain during the long 19th century, with special emphasis on the First World War period.

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