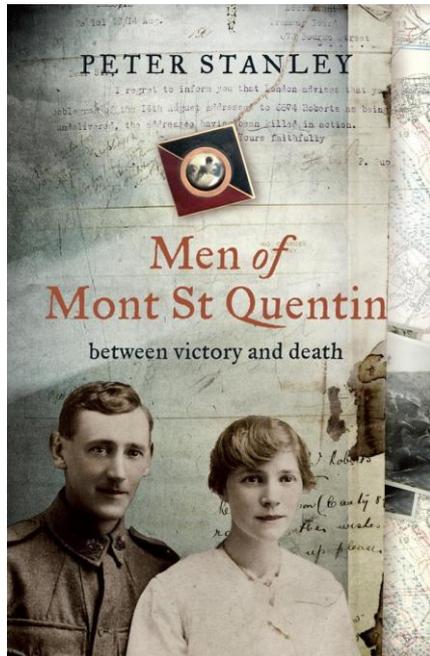


Men of Mont St Quentin: Between victory and death by Peter Stanley. Melbourne: Scribe, 2009, pp. vi + 298, AUD \$35.00 Paperback, ISBN: 9781921215339.



This book follows the men of Nine Platoon, telling of their involvement in battle at Mont St Quentin in France in 1918 and how the fighting affected them and their families. In so doing Peter Stanley examines the memorialisation of events at Mont St Quentin and the development of the Australian First World War story. This attempt to connect military and social history promises much, but – several bright moments aside – the book’s contents fail to match its worthy premise.

Men of Mont St Quentin is based on the papers of Garry Roberts, a Melbourne tramways official, whose son Frank was killed at Mont St Quentin on 1 September 1918. In an effort better to understand his sense of loss and thus assuage his grief, Garry devotedly collected information on anything and everything connected to the day Frank died. The legacy of his obsession is a remarkably detailed primary record of war, love and loss.

Unfortunately, Stanley does not make best use of this source. His history of Nine Platoon has many gaps, for the Roberts papers, extraordinary though they are, do not fully sustain the story Stanley wishes to tell and his supplementary sources do not adequately fill these oversights. For example, in discussing how the First World War affected the surviving members of Nine Platoon, Stanley writes: ‘Neither the survivors nor their families were very communicative in reflecting on the more profound consequences of the war; but, as in pondering why they enlisted, a broader view might suggest ways in which the war might have affected them’. (244) While incomplete sources affect every historian, here the speculation and caveats are so frequent that they become irksome. A further consequence of Stanley’s approach is that the narrative is disjointed and the links between the many sections not always obvious. He would have been better served to have used the Roberts papers in a different manner, perhaps to write a biography of Frank and Garry.

It follows that what detail there is in *Men of Mont St Quentin* comes in the wrong places. For example, Stanley explains aspects of the Australian campaign in France in more depth than seems necessary, so much so that these parts of the book may interest only military historians. This is certainly true of the pages devoted to the specifics of the Lewis gun and its use in battle. Even in the more pertinent sections of the book, the author maintains an unerring eye for irrelevant detail.

It is telling that much of what is interesting in the book is not directly connected to the story of Nine Platoon. For example, Stanley writes well on Australian nationalism and Anzac, explaining how myth can, and does, buttress the legend. In this vein, he raises pertinent questions about events at Mont St Quentin, thus querying its exalted status in the pantheon of Australian military achievement. It is refreshing to read writing on these subjects that is not insular or jingoistic. Stanley is similarly engaging when discussing Charles Bean and Sir John Monash, icons both of Australian history. For instance, he examines the character and achievements of Monash, explaining how his egocentricity and hankering for publicity helped to shape perceptions of what transpired at Mont St Quentin. Stanley is certainly no respecter of reputations, as his forthright opinions of Les Carlyon’s work make clear.

While there are sections of interest in this book, particularly once the narrative shifts from wartime France to post-war Australia, this is a frustrating read. The promise of a fascinating story is never fulfilled.

SEUMAS SPARK
University of Edinburgh