Heroes and Legends of Fin-de-Siècle France

In *Heroes and Legends of Fin-de-Siècle France*, Venita Datta examines representations of fictional and real heroes in the boulevard theater and mass press during the fin de siècle (1880–1914), illuminating the role of gender in the construction of national identity during this formative period of French history. The popularity of the heroic cult at this time was in part the result of France’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, as well as a reaction to changing gender roles and collective guilt about the egoism and selfishness of modern consumer culture. The author analyzes representations of historical figures in the theater, focusing on Cyrano de Bergerac, Napoleon, and Joan of Arc, and examines the press coverage of heroes and anti-heroes in the Bazar de la Charité fire of 1897 and the Ullmo spy case of 1907.

Venita Datta, professor of French at Wellesley College, where she has taught since 1991, is a specialist of French cultural and intellectual history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She is the author of *Birth of a National Icon* (1999) and has published articles in various journals, including *French Historical Studies*, the *Journal of Contemporary History*, *Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques*, *French Cultural Studies*, and *CLIO, Histoire, Femmes et Société*. Professor Datta is a recipient of the Chateaubriand Fellowship, awarded by the French government.
More praise for Heroes and Legends of Fin-de-Siècle France

“Is there anything new to be learned about the construction of French national identity in the decades before World War I? Datta’s thoroughly engaging book shows that there is by exploring the cult of heroes of the day. This strikingly original study finds that the boulevard theater and mass press offered an eager public, anxious about meeting national challenges, a golden age of heroism. A sign of the times was that France’s late-nineteenth-century heroes defined themselves more by martyrdom than by conquest. Carefully reading the evidence not only to uncover France’s culture wars but also to detect less frequently noted areas of national cohesion, Datta makes many surprising revelations, not the least of which is how many cracks there were in the defense of gender orthodoxies. The success of the Third Republic in overcoming poisonous hatreds and preparing France for its life-and-death struggle comes into focus with this important investigation.”

– Lenard R. Berlanstein, University of Virginia

“Through a careful analysis of five causes célèbres between the 1890s and the First World War, Venita Datta’s new book probes the many levels on which the cult of heroism circulated in the French cultural imagination. By revealing a series of tensions and pretensions surrounding the virility of men, the potential of women, and the meaning of Frenchness, Datta shows how conflicting ideas about the hero divided the very nation they aimed to consolidate. This is a fascinating and indispensable contribution to our understanding of culture and politics at the fin de siècle.”

– Christopher E. Forth, author of The Dreyfus Affair and the Crisis of French Manhood

“Venita Datta’s masterful book gets to the heart of the way heroism and historic symbols of French national unity were dramatized in the press and in theaters at the fin de siècle, mitigating, if not healing, the many political and cultural divisions of the era, while preparing the nation for war.”

– Robert Nye, Oregon State University
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Gender, Politics, and National Identity

VENITA DATTA

Wellesley College
For Sean and Neal
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Every book is to some extent a collective endeavor, and this one is no exception. Although the current work begins more or less where the last one ended, it took me some time to figure out where I was going. I am especially grateful to colleagues whom I also count as friends for reading various book abstracts and early drafts: Elinor Accampo, Barbara Day-Hickman, Ruth Harris, William Hitchcock, Raymond Jonas, Dominique Kalifa, Paul Mazgaj, Karen Offen, Jean Pedersen, Mary Pickering, Charles Rearick, Mary-Louise Roberts, Florence Rochefort, Vanessa Schwartz, Gregory Shaya, Willa Silverman, Charles Sowerwine, Mary Lynn Stewart, K. Steven Vincent, and Robin Walz. I am also indebted to a pair of very tough editors, Jo Burr and Ted Margadant, for (repeatedly) obliging me to revise an article that formed the basis of an early chapter.

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