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978-1-107-01889-1 - The Writing Culture of Ordinary People in Europe, c. 1860–1920

Martyn Lyons

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The Writing Culture of Ordinary People in Europe, c. 1860–1920

As war and mass emigration across oceans increased the distances between ordinary people in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many of them, previously barely literate and unaccustomed to writing, began to communicate on paper. This fascinating account explores this surge of ordinary writing, how people met the new challenges of literacy, and the importance of scribal culture to the history of individual experience in modern Europe. Focusing on correspondence and other writing genres produced by French and Italian soldiers in the trenches in the First World War, as well as by Spanish emigrants to the Americas, the book reveals how these writings were influenced by dialect and oral speech, and were oblivious to the rules of grammar, spelling and punctuation. Through their sometimes moving stories, we gain an insight into the importance to ordinary peasants of family, village and nation at a time of rapid social and cultural change.

MARTYN LYONS is Professor of History and European Studies at the University of New South Wales, Sydney. His previous publications include *A History of Reading and Writing in the Western World* (2010) and *Reading Culture and Writing Practices in Nineteenth-Century France* (2008).

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All translations are my own unless otherwise stated. I have provided original quotations in the footnotes where I think this adds flavour or where I am aware there may be alternative readings of my translation.

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