As might be expected, the book is organised chronologically, but the coverage is not evenly spread. The first five chapters deal with the thirty-six years from Henri’s birth to his accession in 1589. The seven chapters which follow, on his twenty-one year reign, focus in particular on the period after 1597, when Henri began to consolidate his position and that of his kingdom and, ultimately, established his legacy. Reading about his life in such depth, this reader was particularly struck by the important role played throughout by women. First, his formidable mother Jeanne d’Albret, committed Protestant and leader of the Huguenot cause; the queen mother and influential political figure throughout the wars, Catherine de Medici; Henri’s only surviving sibling, his sister Catherine; his wives Marguerite de Valois and Marie de Medici; as well as his key mistresses, Gabrielle d’Estre´es and Henriette d’Entragues. This is a sympathetic portrait in which Henri is presented as the man of action, but also very much the family man, ensuring that both his legitimate and illegitimate children were well provided for. Influential male figures are far less evident, but the importance of the duke de Sully in the later part of Henri’s reign is given due prominence.

Although there is little in this book which will surprise or challenge the academic specialist, the text is meticulously researched and elegantly written. It does little to dispel Henri IV’s legend, but it does explore the strengths and flaws in the king’s character which may provide the general reader and the student of history alike with a better and deeper understanding of the challenges he faced and his responses to them during a turbulent age.

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In Before My Helpless Sight, Leo van Bergen attempts to answer the question “what can happen to a soldier between the moment he steps onto a train or ship bound for the theatre of battle and the point at which he is evacuated, wounded or...buried in the ground” (1). Divided into five chapters – Battle, Body, Mind, Aid, and Death – the result is a powerful and humane exploration of how the Great War impacted the bodies and minds of those who served on both sides of the Western Front as combatants and healers. As unpleasant as it is powerful, Before My Helpless Sight forcefully illuminates a world of almost constant fear, fatigue, cold and hunger; a world of unbearable noise and overpowering stench; a world where death, disease, disfigurement, and distress – both mental and physical – were ever present.

The study is not based on new, original research. Rather, it brings together primary and secondary material from a wide variety of countries and languages. Far from detracting from the work, this is one of its great strengths. By
amalgamating material from a variety of sources, van Bergen both effectively challenges the linguistic singularity that often characterizes the study of the First World War, and also presents scholars with a useful tool to navigate the literature on this subject. In a multilingual field of study with a volume of work that has been described as “dizzying in its magnitude,” such a work deserves to be welcomed by scholars with open arms.

Although all of Before My Helpless Sight’s chapters are compelling, it is the fourth chapter – entitled Aid — that is the most gripping. In this chapter van Bergen deftly demonstrates the truth behind Erich Maria Remarque’s observation that “only a military hospital can really show you what war is” (326). Van Bergen lays bare both the suffering of men wounded in combat and the long-term impact of their wounds. In doing so he also explores the frequently bipolar character of military medicine during the conflict, and shows how the war affected the medical professionals charged with the often impossible task of saving and reconstructing the human wreckage produced by the conflict. The result is a chilling exposé of the horrific effects that can be visited on the human body and mind by modern weaponry and of the human and scientific limitations and weaknesses of military medicine during the First World War. Of particular import amongst this litany of human suffering is van Bergen’s highlighting of the fact that many doctors and nurses were as much victims of the conflict as those they treated. While a number of medical professionals were callous, many suffered terribly as a result of their experiences. Overwhelmed by the mass of maimed and mangled men they were required to tend, more than a few doctors and nurses physically and mentally broke down. As van Bergen indicates, the indifference to the horrors confronting them exhibited by some medical professionals was part coping mechanism, part symptom of their own, less obvious wounds. Likewise, the seemingly pitiless decisions to send a barely recovered soldier back to the front, to amputate a limb, or not to provide aid to a severely wounded man were more often driven by military and medical necessity than a cold heart.

Van Bergen employs a number of images to support his text. Amongst stock images of muddy trenches, gasmask-wearing machine gunners, cemeteries, and heavy artillery, van Bergen has also included a number of graphic depictions of individuals physically and mentally maimed as a result of the conflict. The most disturbing image in the work does not depict the suffering and/or death of soldiers at all. Rather, it is a picture of two young Belgian girls who had been killed by artillery fire. This image draws our attention to casualties of the “war to end all wars,” that are often overlooked, if not forgotten: civilians. While those who served in the trenches faced unspeakable horrors, Belgian and French civilians not only lost their work and homes but also their lives. Artillery, as this picture so powerfully indicates, did not discriminate between combatants and civilians, nor, indeed, did poisonous gas.

As one might expect with a study of such breadth, there are points of concern. Stylistically speaking, at times the work is overwritten to point where the text becomes cumbersome. Whether this is the fault of the author, his translator, or
his editor is of no import. What is important is the fact that such unwieldy prose negatively impacts readability. This is especially problematic due the amount of information contained in each chapter, which at times borders on the overwhelming.

Factually speaking, one of the most troubling and obvious errors comes in the work’s introduction. In raising the question as to why the British dominions of Australia, Canada, and New Zealand joined the war in 1914, van Bergen both ignores the strong emotional and familial ties the three polities had with Britain, and muddles their political status. Stating that the three dominions were “no longer colonies” van Bergen not only differentiates them from the self-governing, yet “still technically British colony” of Newfoundland, but also attributes them with complete independence, claiming that the three dominions “decided to enter the war” (6). This simply is not the case. While Australia, Canada, and New Zealand were self-governing polities, they were far from independent states. Indeed, their constitutional status within the British Empire — both in formal and conventional terms — was no different from Newfoundland (and South Africa). Westminster controlled their foreign policy, and retained some — admittedly circumspect — legislative power over their domestic policy as well. Given such circumstances, there is no need to wonder why Australia, Canada and New Zealand entered the war — they had no choice. When Britain was at war, the empire was at war, and so they were at war. While this error takes little way from the focus of the work, it is grating and deserves correction if there is to be a second edition.

Criticisms aside, Before My Helpless Sight is a work of import. Its breadth makes it an excellent first reference for those seeking to explore the human experience of the Great War. Its humanity makes the experience palpable.

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