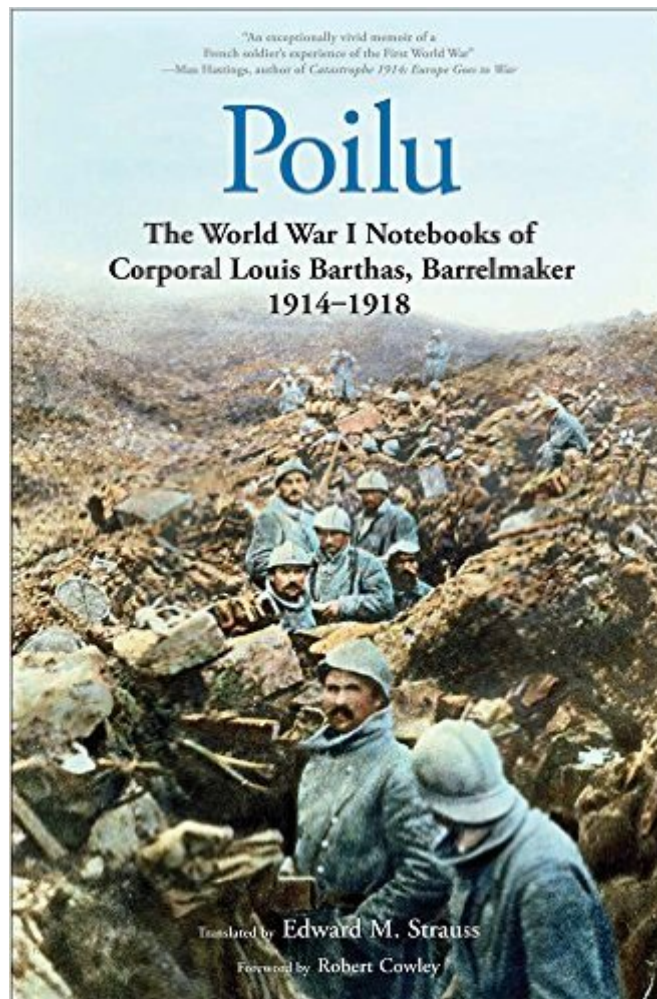


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Poilu: The World War I Notebooks Of Corporal Louis Barthas, Barrelmaker, 1914-1918



Synopsis

The harrowing first-person account of a French foot soldier who survived four years in the trenches of the First World War. Along with millions of other Frenchmen, Louis Barthas, a thirty-five-year-old barrelmaker from a small wine-growing town, was conscripted to fight the Germans in the opening days of World War I. Corporal Barthas spent the next four years in near-ceaseless combat, wherever the French army fought its fiercest battles: Artois, Flanders, Champagne, Verdun, the Somme, the Argonne. Barthas's riveting wartime narrative, first published in France in 1978, presents the vivid, immediate experiences of a frontline soldier. This excellent new translation brings Barthas's wartime writings to English-language readers for the first time. His notebooks and letters represent the quintessential memoir of a poilu, or a hairy one, as the untidy, unshaven French infantryman of the fighting trenches was familiarly known. Upon Barthas's return home in 1919, he painstakingly transcribed his day-to-day writings into nineteen notebooks, preserving not only his own story but also the larger story of the unnumbered soldiers who never returned. Recounting bloody battles and endless exhaustion, the deaths of comrades, the infuriating incompetence and tyranny of his own officers, Barthas also describes spontaneous acts of camaraderie between French poilus and their German foes in trenches just a few paces apart. An eloquent witness and keen observer, Barthas takes his readers directly into the heart of the Great War.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The republication in a new edition from Yale University Press in 2014 of the trench notebooks of

Corporal Louis Barthas provides a strong counter to the extant interpretation of the meaning of WWI as opposed to the view of those who fought the war. The centennial of the start of the war has already resulted in studies by major historians of the how the conflict began, such as "The Sleepwalkers" by Christopher Clark, "July 1914 Countdown to War" by Sean McMeekin, and "The War that Ended Peace" by Margaret MacMillan. Over the next four years no doubt accounts of the various battles of the war will also be published. For approximately four decades after the end of the war, the western historical impression was that it was a futile, pointless, bloody slaughter, a war in Churchill's phrase of "lions led by donkeys", worst among whom was Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, commanding the BEF at the Somme, Passchendaele, etc. Historiography began to change in the late 50's and early 60's, with the principal provocateur the late John Terraine, a non academic but prolific historian. His study of Haig, "The Educated Soldier", shifted at least the opinion of conservative historians away from viewing Haig as the butcher of the Somme, and a callous uncaring man, to thinking of him as brilliant and tenacious enough to keep trying to pry open the German lines until at last in September 1918 he succeeded and shortly thereafter ended the war with Germany by an Armistice.

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