

Ferraris-Besso on Berrong (2018)

Berrong, Richard M. *Pierre Loti*. Reaktion Books, 2018, pp. 224, ISBN 978-1-78-023995-8

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Julien Viaud was, among other things, a sailor, an amateur photographer, a gifted artist, and a celebrity. He travelled throughout the world, making stops in Tahiti, Japan, Morocco, India, Turkey, China, and many other countries. His Rochefort house, which he richly decorated with artifacts brought back from afar, was the location of lavish themed parties, during which he and his guests enjoyed dressing up in historical or exotic costumes. But he was best known as a successful writer and, starting in 1892, as an *Académicien* under the penname Pierre Loti. At first sight, Viaud's life seems to lend itself well to becoming a book. In fact, he himself turned some of his adventures into fiction, deriving several very successful novels from the pages of his diary. Yet this fascinating personality has not prevented the waning of his popularity as a writer. In his introduction to this biography (part of Reaktion's "Critical Lives" series), Richard M. Berrong attributes the public's lack of interest to two factors: first, Loti's publishers in England and the United States "presented him largely as a travel writer and exoticist" (8), which "situate[d] his works as light reading rather than crafted art" (8); second, unlike Proust, who admired him, Loti did not "[conceptualize] his literary endeavours as one sustained opus" (8). As a result, Loti never established a serious readership. For Berrong, he nonetheless deserves to be (re)discovered, if only for his impressionist writing and for his "sustained sympathetic attention to the issue of male same-sex attraction" (9). Berrong attempts to demonstrate that potential for rediscovery as he follows Loti from his birth in 1850 to his death in 1923.

Alain Quella-Villéger's 1998 *Pierre Loti: Le Pèlerin de la planète*, which is generally considered to be the best and most comprehensive biography devoted to the life of the author of *Aziyadé*, is not available in English. With his biography, Richard M. Berrong intends to fill what he considers a gap in Loti scholarship. His work seems to be primarily aimed at an English-speaking audience as the original French text is never provided alongside the translations.

Other popular biographies in English, Berrong argues, "rely too much on Viaud's fiction and not enough on historical documentation" (209), in particular Lesley Blanch's *Pierre Loti, the Legendary Romantic*, which does "not distinguish between the historical Viaud and the autobiographically based characters in his books" (191). Berrong encounters to a certain extent the same pitfall he condemns in the work of his predecessors: throughout the biography, he refers to texts like *Le Roman d'un enfant* and *Prime Jeunesse*, which are "autobiographically based" (like most of Loti's novels). The first chapters in particular draw heavily from those two texts. Berrong also recognizes, about *Le Roman d'un enfant*, that "the book is not reliable autobiography" (13). That he nonetheless refers to those texts is testament to the difficulty of avoiding drawing from Loti's fiction when writing about his life. But we can wonder if, in the case of Loti, such an avoidance is even advisable: after all, Viaud, who Berrong notes "spent much of his life developing [personas] for public consumption" (209), was, as Loti, a celebrity, and went as far as getting buried under a tombstone bearing the name "Pierre Loti," effectively erasing his own name.

If there is a flaw to this well researched, concise, and beautifully illustrated biography, it might be its author's tendency to assess Loti's *œuvre* and life too sympathetically. In the final pages, he argues, for example, that lack of interest in Loti's novels after his death was partly due to political issues: "Viaud's unwavering support of the Turks during the Armenian massacres that started in 1915 did not sit well with liberal Westerners" (185). Even though he mentions Loti's "defence of Turkish massacres of Armenians" (169), his criticism of it is quite muted. In fact, two of Loti's most anti-Armenian books, *Les Massacres d'Arménie* (1918) and *La Mort de notre chère France en Orient* (1920), do not appear in the otherwise comprehensive bibliography (207–09). Berrong is undoubtedly right to bemoan the fact that attention accorded to Loti by literary scholars following Edward Said's publications of the late 1970s has resulted in books and dissertation chapters devoted to his "less important novels" that "were used to denounce the not surprising fact that Viaud shared some of the racial prejudices of his time" (186). Yet while it is true that some contemporary critiques of Loti's novels fail to consider that his political stances are more nuanced than they appear at first, his more problematic positions ought to be discussed if one is to understand Loti's current place in the field of nineteenth- and twentieth-century French studies.

Richard M. Berrong is visibly passionate about Pierre Loti, to whom he has devoted a large part of his scholarship, including two books: *In Love with a Handsome Sailor: The Emergence of Gay Identity and the Novels of Pierre Loti* (2003) and *Putting Monet and Rembrandt into Words: Pierre Loti's Recreation and Theorization of Claude Monet's Impressionism and Rembrandt's Landscapes in Literature* (2013); as well as many articles. Although this biography does not broach the more controversial aspects of Loti's works, it represents a welcome addition to Loti studies for English-speaking readers who wish

to learn more about the life of a captivating author.

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