

**THE LAST DAYS OF
FORT VAUX, MARCH
9 - JUNE 7, 1916**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649147717

The last days of Fort Vaux, March 9 - June 7, 1916 by Henry Bordeaux & Paul V. Cohn

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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HENRY BORDEAUX & PAUL V. COHN

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MARCH 9—JUNE 7, 1916

BY

HENRY BORDEAUX

AUTHOR OF 'LA CROISÉE DES CHEMINS,'
'LES ROQUEVILLARD,' ETC.

TRANSLATED BY PAUL V. COHN, B.A.

143977.
18/10/17.

THOMAS NELSON AND SONS, LTD.

London, Edinburgh, and New York

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THE AUTHOR OF "THE LAST DAYS OF FORT VAUX," M. Henry Bordeaux, is a native of Savoy who has distinguished himself in more than one department of letters before performing his duty manfully in the field, and then as official historian of the Great War. Apart from his reputation in France, M. Bordeaux has probably more readers in this country than any other French novelist of the day. Born in 1870 at Thonon-les-Bains, in Haute-Savoie, he began his career, like so many literary men, by reading law at Paris. He was called to the bar, and duly performed his military service. Then he attracted attention by a series of admirable critical essays, speedily republished in a book, and by an historical romance. He did not, however, forsake law altogether on this first success; but, after the death of his father in 1896, took his place for four years as a practising barrister in his native town, where he also held various municipal posts. Then he could no longer resist the call of art, and from the publication of his novel, *Le Pays Natal*, in 1900 to the outbreak of war, he has divided his life between Paris and Savoy, devoting himself entirely to writing. Besides novels such as *La Peur de vivre*, *Les Roquevillard*, *La Robe de laine*, *La Neige sur les pas*, which bid fair to attain classic rank, M. Bordeaux has worked as a dramatic critic and one of the most sensitive and discerning judges of literature in the leading French reviews.

M. Bordeaux is one of those who keep evergreen by a life of physical as well as mental activity. He is a cyclist and a motorist; one of his favourite sports is fencing; and he is a devotee of that special recreation of the intellectual, Alpine climbing.

Being an impassioned lover of his own beautiful country of Savoy, he is one of the many modern novelists who have identified themselves with a particular region, and invested their books with local colour. At the same time he is a brilliant chronicler of Parisian life. Above all, M. Bordeaux belongs to the school of writers who have raised the tone of French fiction, and freed it from the old reproach of cynicism, frivolity, and immorality. A keen analyst of the modern spirit, he represents all the sterling qualities that have placed France in the front rank among civilized nations. Says one of his countrymen, "Henry Bordeaux has the soul of a poet, a thinker, and a soldier, a soul ardently in love with beautiful rhythms and with noble efforts, a soul firm as a rock and luxuriant as the valleys of its birthplace." His writings are of peculiar interest at the present moment, when France, in her glorious struggle against a brutal invader, is showing the world how sorely her enemies, and even some of her friends, had misjudged her, when they thought she was a prey to decadence. He typifies the reaction from the morbid introspection and ferocious egotism that have marred the work of so many poets and dramatists. A passage in *Les Roquevillard* strikes the keynote of his philosophy. "There is no fine individual destiny. There is no greatness but in service. We serve our family, our country, science, an ideal, God. Shame to those who only serve themselves." This is the teaching of his novel, *La Peur de vivre*,

which illustrates the healing influence of self-sacrifice carried to a well-nigh superhuman extreme; of that powerful study of family solidarity, *The Roquevillards*, and of his tragedy of forgiveness, *La Neige sur les pas*. Another touching story of Dauphiné, *La Croisée des Chemins*, resumes the theme of *Les Roquevillards*, and *La Robe de laine* portrays the mind of a simple girl whose personality cannot be crushed by the juggernaut of modern society or fall a victim to worldly success. These are but a few of the novels and short stories in which M. Bordeaux has painted lofty ideals in the colours of life, and not only touched us with their beauty, but also convinced us of their truth.

In August 1914, as a captain in the reserves, M. Bordeaux at once left for the front in command of a company of territorial infantry, and in due course took part in the desperate fighting of which this book is a record.

In the Battle of Verdun, which broke the back of the German invasion and completed the work that the victories of the Marne and the Yser had begun, two out of the thirty forts which defended the fortress were lost: Fort Douaumont on the evening of February 25, 1916, and Fort Vaux on the morning of June 7.

On October 24, however, Fort Douaumont was regained by the French troops, acting with irresistible dash; and on November 2, All Saints' Day, the enemy was compelled to abandon Fort Vaux. Thus, by the recapture of these two forts, the Battle of Verdun was turned into a victory.

The present work deals with the admirable defence of Fort Vaux from March 9 to June 7, 1916. This defence gave the world an opportunity of gauging the stamina of the French soldier and his powers of resistance. Yet it must not lead us to forget that a little later our troops re-entered the fort as victors.

M. Henry Bordeaux, the novelist of *Les Roquevillards* and *Les Yeux qui s'ouvrent*, was peculiarly entitled to write *The Last Days of Fort Vaux*. He followed the Battle of Verdun as a captain on the Staff, and was mentioned in dispatches in the following terms: "An officer who under all circumstances has displayed the highest military qualities. He volunteered on March 9, 1916, to perform, in our first line, an exceptionally dangerous mission, and carried it out under a furious bombardment."

M. Bordeaux afterwards went on the staff of General Nivelle, now commander-in-chief of the French armies. On September 23, 1916, he was decorated with the Legion of Honour and the War Cross. He has also filled a post in the Press section of the great General Staff, and was, in February 1917, attached to the Historical Archives department of the French War Office. In *The Last Days of Fort Vaux* we thus enjoy the advantage of reading the account of one who is a master both in the art of letters and in the technicalities of war. The successive phases of the heroic defence are presented with a carefulness of detail that must satisfy the military expert and a dramatic force that must impress the general reader. The book is a worthy chronicle of a great episode in the greatest epic of modern days.

P R E F A C E

VERDUN—those two syllables that have already become historic ring out to-day like the brazen tones of a trumpet. In France, no one can hear them without a thrill of pride. In England, in America, if any speaker utters them, the whole audience rises as one man. . . .

Of the battle, of the victory of Verdun, here is a single episode: that of Fort Vaux, beleaguered for three months and lost for a brief space on June 7.

Its defence takes us back past centuries emblazoned with military renown, and recalls our heroic poems of the Middle Ages. It is a Song of Roland in which the protagonist, unseen yet ever present, is the honour of France.

Even as Roland, blowing his horn, recounted from afar the drama of Roncevaux to Charlemagne as he went back across the mountains, so the fort, up to the last moment, kept the supreme command informed of its life and its death-throes by means of signals and carrier-pigeons.