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Vivian R. Gruder, *The Notables and the Nation. The Political Schooling of the French, 1787-1788*. Cambridge, Mass. and London, Harvard University Press, 2007. x + 495 pp. Map, illustrations, appendices, notes, index. \$59.95 (hb.) ISBN 978 0 674 02534 9.

Review Essay by Nigel Aston, University of Leicester.

For the last quarter of a century, Vivian R. Gruder has made the first Assembly of Notables the principal focus of her scholarly activity, and she returns to this theme with this fine book, *The Notables and the Nation*. Approximately half the chapters have appeared previously, but others are new, and these deal primarily with the rapid development of French political life in the eighteen months after the first Assembly was adjourned in May 1787. Taken as a whole, it constitutes an impressive summation of a distinguished body of work, and scholars working on the “Pre-Revolution” will find it impossible to ignore her findings and her claims, including the proposition that these years are not prior to the Revolution at all or any sort of prologue: they constitute its first act. That there was no aristocratic revolt will hardly be news for most historians. They might be more surprised at the spotlight so firmly placed centre-stage by Professor Gruder on “a broad and diverse public” (p. 157). Only the first three chapters concern themselves with the two Assemblies of Notables proper. All have appeared previously. It is their summons to meet at Versailles and advise the monarchy on its fiscal difficulties that Gruder points up as the beginning of the Revolutionary process leading on to a “path of widening political criticism” (p. 7) that was impossible for the authorities to reverse even if they had wanted to. Of course, by 1787 the place of the public in national life was essentially uncontested (beyond deciding what its authority was in relation to the king’s), and the Notables were keen to reach out and fashion “an image of themselves as spokesmen and defenders of the public” (p. 31) because they thereby underlined their own institutional significance. It remains hard to assess (rather harder than Gruder might concede) how far the Notables believed in public involvement in the life of the state as per se desirable; they certainly believed in their own indispensability to the public as its guardians and protectors. Gruder states that the Notables were representative of the elite, but it is unclear whether she believes that this was accidentally achieved; there is disappointingly little on the criteria adopted for selection of the Notables that might help to throw light on their “representativeness” of the élite. Gruder confines herself to laying bare the thoughts and opinions of archbishops Brienne and Boisgelin, Coeurderoy (the president of the parlement of Lorraine) and Joly de Fleury (*procureur général* of the Paris parlement) on their roles in the Assembly. Much of this material will be familiar, and it would have been more gratifying to have learnt more about the perspective of the princes who were heads of the bureaux or some of the lesser luminaries in the membership. The client links of the Notables, both nationally and locally, remain to be systematically set out.

Gruder talks of the “collective consciousness” (p. 32) of the Notables. That may be slightly overstated, but, as far the proceedings of the bureaux can be reconstructed, the Notables exhibited an institutional confidence that surprised most observers and perhaps even themselves. They had no time for Calonne’s identification of the “national interest” with his own; insisted on the need for consent to contentious public proposals and exhibited a suspicion

of bureaucracy and secret influence. So much—the subject of chapter two—is well-known, due in no small part to Gruder’s own researches. She claims that the Notables were in part echoing and giving vent with “renewed vigor to sentiments already long-lived and commonplace” (p. 57), but, if this was quite so much the case, it remains hard to explain how Calonne and the king imagined that it would not be thus. Gruder offers no pointers, but she does return to the key question of what constituted (popular) consent and its links to representation. The debate on the latter is well covered (p. 62ff) but the extent to which the Notables—and French political opinion more widely—were following the debates on the constitution in the United States, in Pittite Britain, and in the revolting provinces of the Habsburg Empire are overlooked, here as throughout the book. This is a book with politics at the centre; it is not one, alas, with much of a comparative feel to it.

The first Assembly of Notables aligned itself with the nation at large, indeed urged a participatory role for propertied commoners in Provincial Estates and Assemblies throughout France; the second Assembly (November–December 1788) was fearful of public opinion and was anxious to shore up the position of the first two Estates by reinvigorating atrophied juridical distinctions for political purposes between themselves and commoners. The bulk of *The Notables and the Nation* is devoted to explaining how that disconnection came about. Gruder is not treading chronologically in a bid to update Jean Egret’s classic text on these months. Instead, she painstakingly seeks out signs—and they were super-abundant—of political consciousness by looking at the literature, every kind of it, as writers held up mirrors to the public and then themselves reflected back that gaze. This second section, “The Media and the Public: Networks of Information, Opinion, Instruction,” is the core of the book.

Domestic newspapers were hamstrung from openly expressing views on politics until late 1788 when Necker removed most of the constraints. Nevertheless, editors had well-established devices in place to offer furtive commentaries on current events, and the summoning of the Assembly of Notables gave ample scope for historical reflections that stoked up constitutional expectations that the Franks could once again be a free people. Gruder devotes appreciable attention to manuscript newsletters such as the *Mémoires secrets*, those private letters claiming to deal in (state) secrets that could be either printed or hand-written. This chapter on manuscript newsletters is a useful and original general essay based on some formidable research that confirms the work of Simon Burrows as to how much the *nouvellistes* were a powerful force in steering and reflecting public opinion throughout 1787–88 (as well as earlier).^[1] In these months, she considers, the French public is found “not as monolithic whole” but rather made up of “different groups [that] formed, altered course, and [she adds portentously] became prepared for Revolution” (p. 149). Journalists were key agents in fostering this sense of participatory entitlement, as were the pamphleteers whose outpourings (the subject of chapter eight) acted as “a barometer of politics” (p. 169).

Chapters nine and ten are dynamic and suggestive and have not appeared in any previous format. The first on readers and what Gruder calls “reading sites” lucidly clarifies the distinction between *chambres de lecture* and *cabinets de lecture*. Her own categories of “extensive” and “intensive” also come across as serious readers seeking engagement with politics rather than seeking refuge from its ubiquitous presence in France during the late 1780s. And what of women readers and the extent of their political interests? Gruder is strangely neglectful of them and, more widely, of the gendered dimension to this emergent national politics. This absence is the more surprising as it would reinforce her central claim that 1787–89 should properly be considered part of the Revolution. The second deals with the verbal, visual, and festive dimensions of Gruder’s “political schooling.” She is exhaustive on the visual but insufficiently amusing about the jokes told about the Notables (could she not have shared some of them with her readers?), and her discussion of the rites of carnival in relation to the lived experience of the

politics of 1787-88 adds a completely new dimension to our understanding of these key months. There is clearly scope for more extended consideration of the material culture produced during the “Pre-Revolution” along the lines attempted, for instance, by Eirwen Nicholson in her study of the Sacheverell Crisis in England of 1709-10.[2]

The last three chapters appear under the heading “At the Grass Roots” and have a slight sense of the leavings from the rest of the book. Chapter eleven on popular pamphlets has already appeared previously and contains themes and insights largely raised in Section Two, chapter twelve on the voices of the peasants, with its conclusion that there was “a contest for peasant support” (p. 322), is similarly known to scholars. It is chapter thirteen that is the highpoint of this trio. Here Gruder looks at meetings in administrative districts across the country between May 1788 and January 1789 and surveys the awakening of the Third Estate. She presents enough information to persuade all but the most sceptical that it was becoming proactive in its own right as well as reactive to royal orders relating to the Estates-General. However, it is too easily forgotten that this muscle flexing by the non-nobles was actually sanctioned by the government which had on 5 July 1788 invited the nation to explore documents on Estates-Generals in the past and advise on the formation of a reconvened body. Gruder also seems unsure of the stability of this emerging political colossus: on p. 354 she refers to the group solidarity of the commoners. Two pages further on and one finds that they possess a “fragile group cohesion” (p. 356).

If these are loose ends, then they are suggestive and scarcely detract from the scale of Gruder’s achievement in *The Notables and the Nation*. This is a book that suggests the dynamism of a popular political culture that would no longer be imposed upon whether by ministers, magistrates or Notables and was incapable of imposing its own agenda. Since she sees a “grassroots democracy” at work (p. 336), Gruder disputes the view of Jean Egret and William Doyle that the opposition to the May Edicts of 1788 would in time have faded.[3] This position is certainly tenable, although it leaves the state bankruptcy out of the account and undervalues the importance of high political manoeuvrings. Given this degree of public consciousness and awareness, it is amazing how France’s unrepresentative government had managed to survive into the 1780s without insisting that alterations were engineered in the monarchy. Much is here presumed regarding the relative maturity of public opinion in 1787-88, almost no less so than in contemporary Britain. Gruder does not tell us how it came to be so. Here it emerges unbound in response to the first Assembly of Notables without any preliminary summary that might have drawn on the work, for instance, of scholars such as James Van Horn Melton, Mona Ozouf, Arlette Farge, Keith Michael Baker or Roger Chartier.[4] The author would have assisted some readers by some small reference at least to its evolution earlier in the century. She is aware that measuring the impact of these varied genres of texts on the public of the 1780s—“known only through impressionistic observations of a few contemporaries” (p. 217)—is problematic, and yet she is occasionally guilty of insufficient caution herself.

Her presentation and analyses are also overwhelmingly secular and the religious aspects of the political contest of 1787-88 are hardly considered. She offers a profound insight into how much harsh polemics antedated the Revolution with their “demonization of adversaries.” This apparently represents “the scars of history and the imprint of religious culture” (p. 181), and yet we learn nothing of the latter, and it is at face value a lop-sided and unfair reading of Tridentine teaching ministry among the laity with its emphasis on the associated values of forgiveness and good-neighbourliness. Gruder is sure that sermons contained political messages (p. 261) but actually surveys only two of them. This is a surprising given the importance of the homily as a legitimate mode of discourse in pre-Revolutionary France. Likewise there is no consideration of the widely perceived providential dimension of the crisis or the role of the Church in moulding responses to it for a public that was made up of its parishioners. Gruder accepts that priests

acted as key “cultural intermediaries” (pp. 304–5), but it might have been helpful for her to have focused on clerical political activity in regions where clergy were less supportive of change than the Auvergne and Dauphiné.

Religion may be largely absent from Gruder’s cultural presentation, but she does full justice to this society’s determination to be guided by what it understood had happened in the past: to look back was to look forward. There was an amazing proliferation of history manuals in these years with arguments from history and archival investigations positively encouraged by the Crown. Gruder appears to find this obsession with precedent slightly concerning and appears almost desperate to have explanatory recourse to the “Enlightenment” despite the absence of the *philosophes* and their formulae from the literature. It is surely explicable that in a crisis of government that was predicated on constitutional recovery antiquarian delving offered answers that general precepts of philosophy could not embody. This was a decade in which the appetite for constitutionalism was ubiquitous, and yet it was one the Crown was slow to recognise with ministers like Miromesnil imagining they were still living in the Versailles of the 1680s rather than the 1780s. The battle against representative assemblies was over and lost, but some of the Crown’s advisers remarkably slow to perceive that. Even Loménie de Brienne, one of the leading engines of opposition in the first Assembly of Notables, gave way to the absolutist impulse that could get the better of intelligent ministers. Had he, once Principal Minister, continued the Assembly instead of proroguing it there would have been an immediate easing of political tensions. For had the Crown but been able to tap into it, there was an overwhelming sympathy for the monarchy retained by the majority of the king’s subjects. Brienne proved incapable of strengthening himself by cultivating the basic royalist sentiments that existed at a popular level, and Gruder makes clear that the average Frenchman wanted the end of absolutism but not an end to the reassuring comfort of the king as a father figure. It only required a popular politician like Necker to rekindle the connection between the nation and the sovereign, a politician attempting to bring the king out of hiding and to associate him with the constitutionalist ambitions of the majority population at a juncture when popular rage against the nobility and magistrates was determining Third Estate opinion. The problem for Louis XVI was so often that he did not (or could not) sufficiently distance himself from the aggressive traditionalism of other princes of the blood, expressed, for example, in the *Mémoire* of December 1788 excoriating the claims of the Third Estate.

Too much of this book is written with one eye on the Revolution though that may be excusable if one believes that the Revolution has already started. For Vivian R. Gruder, the “Political Schooling of the French” took place not in time of pre-Revolution but actual Revolution (or at least, one might say, *quasi*-Revolution). She sees, no later than early 1788, every indication that “a public of followers was becoming an autonomous public” (p. 158). This was nothing less than a full-fledged “national political community” (p. 165) engaging with internal opponents and capable of wresting the political initiative from them by 1789. In effect she is abolishing the classic category of the “Pre-Revolution 1787–89.” Most historians, despite the quality of her arguments, will take a little more convincing. At times the author herself can hardly bring herself to believe it. Thus she writes that the French were “preparing for Revolution” (p. 149) (one might rather say with more accuracy that they were preparing for a reconvening of the Estates-General). And if the “pre-Revolution” did not take place between 1787 and 1789 then when did it occur? This is not the least important of the questions left us by this fascinating volume.

NOTES

[1] Simon Burrows, *Blackmail, Scandal and Revolution: London's French Libellistes, 1758–1792* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

[2] Eirwen E.C. Nicholson, "From Consumers to Spectators: The Public of the Political Print in eighteenth-century England," *History* 81 (1996), pp. 5-21, essay on Sacheverell and popular culture. Her book *Bloody Flag, Painted Fans: Dr Sacheverell and Anglican Culture 1688-1724* is in preparation. See generally Geoffrey Holmes, *The Trial of Dr Sacheverell* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1973).

[3] Jean Egret, *La Pré-révolution française, 1787-1788* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1962), and William Doyle, *The origins of the French revolution* (3rd edn., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[4] James Van Horn Melton, *The rise of the public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Mona Ozouf, "'Public Opinion" at the end of the Old Regime', *Journal of Modern History* 60, suppl. (1988), S1-21; Arlette Farge, *Subversive Words: Public Opinion in eighteenth-century France* (Pennsylvania: Penn State UP, 1995); 'Dialogue sur l'espace public: Keith Michael Baker, Roger Chartier', *Politix: travaux de science politique* 26 (1994).

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