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Harry Liebersohn, *Aristocratic Encounters: European Travelers and North American Indians*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1998. xi + 179pp. Notes, illustrations, bibliographical references, index. \$54.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-521-64090-3. \$19.95 U.S. (pb). 0-521-64090-3.

Review by David Higgs, University of Toronto.

The social history of European nobles after the French Revolution has demonstrated their financial, familial, and political strategies for survival in democratic societies where citizens were equal before the law. Contemporaries however "underestimated the inventiveness of European elites" (p. 165). Another set of approaches investigates the cultural creations by which post-revolutionary French aristocrats and nobles convinced themselves that they were superior to, or at least different from, plebeian fellow citizens. "Aristocratic refashionings may have struck contemporaries as anachronisms, but in retrospect we may view them as important and original nineteenth-century creations" (p. 166). Harry Liebersohn has ingeniously linked together the noble self confidence about their collective distinction with that of the curiosity of nineteenth-century Europeans about crossing cultures. The noble savage was a concept enunciated by writers some of whom had never set foot on a Pacific atoll or the North American prairies and used to bolster the Enlightenment project. Liebersohn turns his gaze on European nobles who were fascinated by North American Indians and who met or travelled among them during the nineteenth century.

This is an elegant book, well illustrated, of less than two hundred pages, which gives food for thought about European elite attitudes towards other societies in the period before the great surge in imperial outreach after 1880. Footnote references to Georg Lukács and Walter Benjamin lead on to Stephen Greenblatt and Stuart Schwartz and other producers in the rapidly burgeoning literature on inter-cultural encounters. The text is organized into three parts and an epilogue. First is the transition from neoclassical to romantic writings about American Indians from 1682 to 1815, stressing the fiction of Chateaubriand's *Atala*. The second considers French travelers from 1815 to 1848 and sociological insights in Alexis de Tocqueville. The third part addresses the sustained observation of the ethnography of Maximilian of Wied. Liebersohn is attentive to all three elements of fiction, sociology, and ethnography in writings about Amerindians. He sees those evocations as part of the making of a new aristocratic culture different from that of the end of the Old Regime. His elite European observers were impressed with their view of the hunter and warrior culture of the American Indians.

Liebersohn argues that French and German aristocrats, with recent memories of persecution, exile, and loss of status resulting from the French Revolution and social change, had an empathy for the Amerindian warriors whose world was being destroyed by the advance of the frontier. Liebersohn asserts that British observers were more condescending (less Romantic?) coming as they did from a

society where the privileges of the elite were never seriously challenged. Anglo-American attitudes were also conditioned by a complex love-hate attitude of the former metropole towards an estranged former colony.

Liebersohn touches on the mixed messages in the *Jesuit Relations* about the character of the native peoples of New France. They were souls to be saved, but also they sometimes martyred missionaries. He points to missionaries, some of aristocratic background, who rejected the stress on hunting and warfare as inimical to Christianization strategies. The book encourages further thought about one of the forms of French noble interests in Amerindians—that of Catholic missionaries in the nineteenth century. St. Eugène de Mazenod never visited North America, but he dispatched members of his Oblates of Mary Immaculate to the Canadian prairies to work among the aboriginals.

Noble attitudes to Amerindians should perhaps not be separated out from their attitudes towards Africans and Asians. Various French liberal aristocrats were active in the movement for the abolition of slavery in France in the first half of the nineteenth century as the book by Lawrence C. Jennings makes plain.[1]

Liebersohn's book is profusely illustrated with North American Amerindian pictures from before 1900. Just as his authors are all males so are the subjects of most of the pictures. They favor hunters and fighters; however, the pictures are not by nobles so their relevance to the text is problematic. They do show the kind of artistic representations of American Indians available before photos became part of the visual record.

He might have considered more systematically that noblewomen played a central part in transmitting cultural values in their social category. The conventions of nineteenth-century elite women did not permit them to go off roughing it in the bush to make observations of Amerindians. Henri Rossi's book on French noblewomen memoirs suggests some of the avenues that might present themselves for an exploration of noble child rearing, or attitudes towards siblings, conduct, or career choices which are part of noble identity.[2] French nobles who served in the post-revolutionary military sometimes composed memoirs which showed the return to a military vocation as in the case of colonel comte Charles d'Agoult.[3] Nobles became a leisure paradigm in the nineteenth century for the economically successful, of enjoying rural life and cultivating personal distinction. This extended over generations. The Castelbajac of the Restoration Chamber of Deputies was a noisy ultra-royalist deputy; a contemporary Castelbajac is a fashion designer much appreciated in the Vatican. Henri Mendras has argued that Old Regime aristocrats are in some senses a model for the increasingly numerous retired French people who have a) means and b) time in retirement to busy themselves with gratuitous activities like art collecting, recreational travel, or charitable work.[4] Nobles offer an imagined identity fortified by the study of noble historical and family antecedents, or of fictions about them. Liebersohn has written a book which should encourage other cultural studies for extending the understanding of changing attitudes by French nobles toward social diversity in nineteenth-century France, Europe and the wider world.

NOTES

[1] L.C. Jennings, *French Anti-Slavery: the Movement for the Abolition of Slavery in France, 1802-1848* (New York and Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[2] Henri Rossi, *Mémoires aristocratiques féminins 1789-1848* (Paris: Champion, 1998).

[3] Charles d'Agoult, *Mémoires*, édition établie et annotée par Chantal de Saint Priest d'Urgel (Paris: Mercure de France, 2001).

[4] Henri Mendras, "What is left of 1789?" in *Unfinished Revolutions: Legacies of Upheaval in Modern French Culture*, ed. Robert T. Denomé and Roland H. Simon (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), p. 173.

David Higgs
University of Toronto
dhiggs@chass.utoronto.ca

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