

---

*H-France Review* Vol. 2 (February, 2002), No. . 24

David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2001. xiv + 304 pp. Notes, index, and 16 illustrations. \$45.00 US (cl). ISBN 0-674-00447-7.

Review by Thomas E. Kaiser, University of Arkansas at Little Rock.

It is one of the lesser paradoxes of our age that just at a time when the emergence of the European Union has made nationalism in western Europe appear to be something of a relic, scholars have developed a growing interest in the subject—so much so that it is difficult to keep up with the expanding number of publications devoted to nationalism's many manifestations. In an increasingly crowded domain, this major study by David A. Bell is certain to tower over its French quarter, in part because his book persuasively challenges many conventional ideas about nationalism in the hexagon: among them, that it was the ideological reflex of an expanding state and that it originated in the push to expel the English during the Hundred Years' War. In Bell's view, "nationalism" is a distinctly modern phenomenon, which owes its existence to far broader shifts in French political and religious culture.

Bell's study defies easy summary. It is not a history of what Bell calls "national sentiment." That is, the book does not focus on the social and political processes that generated the affective and material bonds holding the French national community together. Nor does it investigate what the "nation" meant in the quotidian experience of ordinary people. In this regard, Bell's approach differs markedly from that of Eugen Weber and Peter Sahlins, who have studied how individuals in various regions of France came to relate their own lives to the wider French community.[1] Nor does this book seek to provide—as do most of the contributors to Pierre Nora's widely read, synoptic *Lieux de mémoire*—a history of French "national identity," understood as a more or less fixed psychic pole erected by a genealogy of politically engaged intellectuals, many of them patronized by the central state.[2] In Bell's view, French "national identity" has been much too unstable to have a coherent history, while the French state pre-existed French "nationalism" by several centuries. This view complicates considerably the connection between the rise of the monarchy and the emergence of "nationalism," which has sometimes been characterized as little more than as an advertising halo for state-building.

For Bell, "nationalism," unlike "national sentiment," entails a deliberately resolved political program "not merely to praise, or defend or strengthen a nation, but actively to construct one, casting its human raw material into a fundamentally new form" (p. 3). The French "nation" may have existed since the Middle Ages, Bell asserts, but it was conceived in the pre-modern period as a product of God, history, and/or nature, not as an assertion of a collective, specifically human will. This assertion of human will is the essential ingredient of what Bell means by "nationalism." A common history, language, culture, territory, and/or state can make a people imagine that they belong together. Paradoxically, however, it is only when a people actively recognizes that it is not yet a nation, but could become one through a determined effort to transform the entire population into citizens, that true "nationalism" can emerge.[3] In Bell's view, there was no "nationalist" project in France throughout most of the early modern period. Even the Sun King, for all his well-advertised patronage and political use of court culture, did not undertake such a project, having been wholly indifferent, for example, to the language spoken by the peasantry.

When exactly was French “nationalism” invented? According to Bell, in the eighteenth century. One of its causes was the escalating crisis of absolutism, in which the monarchy gradually lost the authority to speak unilaterally in the name of the “nation” and the “nation” was reconstructed as an entity independent of the crown. Some interpreters of “nationalism,” notably Liah Greenfeld,[4] have identified the “nation” as an ideological fixture of the disempowered, resentful French nobility. In contrast, Bell much more convincingly argues that the new concept of the “nation” was invoked not only by the monarchy’s aristocratic critics, but also by the monarchy, in part because by the 1760s it had to grapple with a growing public discussion of political issues. The monarchy’s most notable use of the concept, Bell shows, lay in the unprecedented propaganda campaign run by the government to mobilize mass public opinion during the Seven Years’ War (1756-1763), a campaign in which the crown represented the war as a conflict between nations, not, as in all previous wars, a conflict between dynasties.[5]

Critical as “nationalism” was to the debate on royal sovereignty, Bell insists that to view it only as a political construct would entail misconstruing its origins and missing a good deal of its resonance. For this reason, he devotes most of his book to a searching examination of the place of “nation” and “patrie” in various aspects of eighteenth-century French culture, including French perceptions of the British, the growing cult of great Frenchmen, and religion. Religion plays a key role in Bell’s story, for it provides him with one of his principal arguments—namely, that “nationalism” was in part the result of a fundamental reconceptualization of the relationship between the sacred and the profane. Drawing heavily upon Marcel Gauchet’s celebrated argument regarding the progressive “disenchantment of the world,”[6] Bell contends that the aggregate effect of Protestantism, Jansenism, science, and other related movements was not so much to corrode belief in the core of Christian theology as to drive a conceptual wedge between God and the world, thereby creating a secular space to be explained by secular forces in secular language. It was in this space that a new concept of “nation” took root alongside a number of sister-concepts, including *patrie* (the near twin of “nation”), the public, civil society, and civilization. Each concept had its own particular discursive field, but all referred to some sort of self-willed human community.

Despite their essentially secular content, Bell argues that these concepts retained certain traces of the Catholic context in which they incubated. Thus, as heirs to the universalistic claims of the Catholic Church, the eighteenth-century French did not define their “nation” in the same xenophobic and exclusionary manner as the Protestant English envisioned Britain, but instead imagined the French national mission as a contribution to the “progress” and “regeneration” of humankind as a whole. Conversely, because the British stubbornly resisted the “gifts” of civilization so magnanimously provided to humankind by its French benefactors, the people of perfidious Albion were frequently described by the French as “barbarians.” Another echo of the Catholic past lay in the Revolution’s campaign to turn peasants into French citizens. The Revolutionary program of education, theater, and festivals employed many of the same techniques the Catholic Church had used to uproot “pagan” practices and institute orthodoxy since the Counter Reformation. As Bell insists, imitation was certainly not meant as flattery, but on the contrary helped prepare the new “nation” for combat against its enemies. In a particularly interesting chapter, Bell shows how the Revolutionary effort to roll back the use of regional patois and impose standard French was motivated by a will to counter the cultural gravity of the Church in the provinces. Despite setbacks, Bell concludes, it was the secular republican version of the “nation” championed by the Revolution that eventually swept the field clear of all opposing notions, thereby laying the foundations of contemporary French nationalism.

As indicated above, this relatively brief book on a big subject is a major milestone in the interpretation of French nationalism, and it deserves to be read alongside Linda Colley’s splendid *Britons*—a book that helped inspire this one.[7] Extraordinarily well-written, erudite, and witty, it reflects a grasp of the contours and depths of French history and culture that is truly stunning. Most important, this book provides a stimulating framework for reconceptualizing eighteenth-century French political culture in

general, and it applies this framework to important yet neglected topics in a highly original way. It will surely serve as one indispensable point of departure for all future investigations of French nationalism and related subjects well into the future.

At the same time, it is doubtful whether Bell's overall argument regarding the "invention" of French nationalism in the eighteenth century will convince fully the many readers that this fine book is bound to attract. In large part, one's judgment will depend upon whether one accepts the fundamental distinction posited by the author between an antique "national sentiment" and modern "nationalism." In the view of this reader, Bell certainly has identified a number of key elements that became prominent in some eighteenth-century iterations of the French national vision and coalesced in the ideology of the French Revolution: the foundation of the nation in a Rousseauistic secular, human will; the disjunction between king and nation; the uncompleted nature of the national project; and the perception of the "lower" orders of society as integral, if as yet unassimilated parts of the "nation." [8] But whether all forms of "nationalism" did or must contain all, or even most, of these elements is not obvious; nor is it clear that all the more "progressive" representations of the "nation" in the eighteenth century were so different from those that came before.

Take the matter of climate and geography, which, as Bell points out, many eighteenth-century theorists--most notably Montesquieu--considered to be important contributing factors in defining the "nation." Insofar as they allowed that climate and geography did play a role in this process, it is evident that the "nation" was thought to be not purely the product of human will--Bell's *sine qua non* of nationhood--but at least in part a product of nature, and in this regard the eighteenth-century "nation" closely resembled some earlier incarnations. Thus, for example, the sixteenth-century historian Estienne Pasquier observed how "the diversity of laws is due to the diversity of manners which arises in people according to the diversity of regions and environment, and just as a doctor changes the remedy for patients with regard to countries, ages, and complexions, so the wise legislator acts toward the people he governs." [9] In much the same spirit, many Enlightenment writers on public affairs were wary of legislating too much against the grain of environmentally induced national character. Among them was, of course, Montesquieu, with his frequent admonitions to align the laws of a nation with its climate. But there was also Rousseau. Despite his fixation on the general will unbounded by previous political obligations, Rousseau in his *Du contrat social* recognized the major impact of mountains, riverbanks, and fertile plains on the economies and character of a people. He urged lawgivers to harmonize political constitutions with "natural relations" and warned that if they did not follow the principles reflecting these "circumstances," their constitutions would fail and "invincible nature regain its empire." [10]

History, too, continued to be important in the definition of the "nation" during the eighteenth century. As Bell knows as well as anyone, the debate on the monarchy until 1789 rested heavily upon conceptualizing the "nation" in historical terms, even if the monarchy and its critics constructed sharply opposing visions of the national past to bolster their respective arguments. Here again, the "nation" was not the product of an all-determining national "will." Absolutists and anti-absolutists alike imagined it essentially as the emanation of a slowly evolving custom, and so did the right in 1789, which argued that what France needed was only a better articulated constitution, not a wholly new one. [11] Gallicanism, which Bell barely refers to even in regard to national "sentiment," also promoted an identification of the "nation" with a certain vision of the past, especially once it informed Jansenist/parlement discourse in the debates over the anti-Jansenist papal bull *Unigenitus*. [12] From a different perspective, even Rousseau believed that the assertion of the general will was conditioned by its historical moment and made the remarkably pessimistic statement that only in Corsica was it not too late to constitute a free society. [13]

The situation following the Revolution--which it is certainly not Bell's intention to do more than sketch--also raises some questions about the paradigmatic status of his version of modern French "nationalism." Bell is, of course, on firm ground in maintaining that a certain republican vision of the

"nation" did triumph in the end. But in my view, he skips too easily over the very real threat to republican "nationalism" posed until recent times by the Catholic right, which in its competing vision of the "nation" offered quite different views on the relation of the secular to the divine, social hierarchy, and the distribution of power. Indeed, it was largely because France had not reached consensus on its self-definition after 1815 that the modern French political system was so polarized and unstable. Even if it is true, as Bell asserts, that of all the post-Revolutionary regimes only Vichy acted systematically upon non-republican definitions of the "nation," there were certainly strong reverberations of right-wing "nationalism" in other regimes, especially the Restoration, not to mention the loud thumping of the anti-Dreyfusards during the Third Republic. And it is hardly necessary to remind readers of recent findings that Vichy was an authentically French regime, which gave vent to decades of *ressentiment* against the "nation" Bell has described so well. If one is to agree with Bell that Vichy "owed its existence to a foreign power" (p. 204), one might well say the same thing of the Third Republic.[14]

Finally, as Bell acknowledges but does not, in my view, take enough into account, the post-Revolutionary republican left historicized its national vision in a manner that the Revolutionaries would have found profoundly troubling, to say the least. To republican historians after 1815, pre-Revolutionary history was not the mere occasion for France's self-definition in 1789, since for them, as for right-wing historians, the birth of the nation was an emergent process, not a single foundational act. The upshot was that the historians of the left celebrated and, so to speak, placed in the pantheon of national memory, institutions and people at best neglected and at worst spurned by Revolutionary republicans as relics of the despised Old Regime. Among these relics, to be sure, was Joan of Arc, whom "all French people," Ernest Lavisse advised the young readers of his textbook, "should love with all their heart" because she "died for her king, for France, for us." [15] But much else besides was re-incorporated into the "national" past, including what Jules Michelet, with just a touch of Boulainvillan nostalgia, described as "the infinite variety of the feudal world, the multiplication of objects, which, [although] at first fatigues the eye and the mind, is no less the revelation of France." [16]

What the above suggests, in conclusion, is that French "nationalism" came in so many varieties it is difficult to pin down the precise historical moment it was "invented." But this does not mean its history had no shape. The main contribution of this powerful book is to account for and brilliantly characterize one of nationalism's most influential incarnations, and for this historians will remain indebted to its author.

## NOTES

[1] Among their many works that bear on this subject, see Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1979) and Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989).

[2] Pierre Nora, ed., *Les Lieux de mémoire* 7 vols. (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1984-1993). This work has been heavily critiqued in Steven Englund, "The Ghost of the Nation Past," *Journal of Modern History* 64 (1992): pp. 299-320.

[3] It will be apparent to scholars of eighteenth-century French political culture how much Bell owes to Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990)—as evidenced not merely by the title, but also by Bell's appropriation of what Baker calls the "discourse on will." Bell's methodology differs from Baker's in that Bell situates discourse more fully within a socio-political context. In being indebted to Baker, he is, of course, in large and distinguished company.

---

[4] Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

[5] In this regard, Bell's book provides a much broader context for the important work, Edmond Dziembowski, *Un Nouveau patriotisme français, 1750-1770: La France face à la puissance anglaise à l'époque de la guerre de Sept Ans*, in *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* Vol. 365 (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1998). For my review, see H-France List, April 2000 at <http://www3.uakron.edu/hfrance/reviews/kaiser2.html>.

[6] Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, trans. Oscar Burge (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998).

[7] Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven, Conn. and London: Yale University Press, 1992).

[8] On the inculcation of patriotism in the "lower" orders, one should also consult Harvey Chisick, *The Limits of Reform in the Enlightenment: Attitudes toward the Education of the Lower Classes in Eighteenth-century France* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), which Bell does not cite. For the rehabilitation of the "people" in another context, see John G. Gagliardo, *From Pariah to Patriot: The Changing Image of the German Peasant, 1770-1840* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1969).

[9] Quoted in Donald R. Kelley, *Foundations of Modern Historical Scholarship: Language, Law, and History in the French Renaissance* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1970), p. 290. I would give greater weight than Bell does to the development of a specifically French legal identity during this period, as described in detail by Kelley.

[10] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du contrat social*, Bk. II, chap. 11. Translation mine.

[11] The best general account of these developments is Dale K. Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: From Calvin to the Civil Constitution, 1560-1791* (New Haven, Conn. and London: Yale University Press, 1996), which stresses the impact of Gallicanism.

[12] Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution*, chap. 11. In the pre-Revolutionary debate on the monarchy, the king claimed the right to assert his legislative will as a function of his absolute sovereignty, but even if some royalist historians considered them to be originally royal concessions, the "fundamental laws" of the nation, sanctioned by tradition, were recognized as valid limits to the exercise of this will. It is also worth noting that while they were heavily invested in their opposing visions of the monarchy's origins at the time of the Frankish conquest, both Boulainvilliers and the abbé Dubos acknowledged the legitimacy of certain prescriptive rights. On Boulainvilliers, see Harold A. Ellis, *Boulainvilliers and the French Monarchy: Aristocratic Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 1988); on Dubos, see Thomas E. Kaiser, "The Abbé Dubos and the Historical Defense of Monarchy in Early Eighteenth-Century France," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, No. 267 (1989), pp. 77-102.

[13] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du contrat social*, Bk. II, chap. 10.

[14] For a recent, more balanced view of these competing visions, see Pierre Birnbaum, *The Idea of France*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001).

---

[15] Ernest Lavisse, *Histoire de France: Cours élémentaire* (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1919), p. 85. Translation mine.

[16] Jules Michelet, *Histoire de France*, 17 vols. (Paris, 1835-1845), 2: p. 2. Translation mine.

Thomas E. Kaiser  
University of Arkansas at Little Rock  
[tekaiser@ualr.edu](mailto:tekaiser@ualr.edu)

See also [David A. Bell's response](#) to Thomas E. Kaiser's review.

Copyright © 2002 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies. ISSN 1553-9172