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D.M.G. Sutherland, *The French Revolution and Empire: The Quest for a Civic Order*. Malden, Mass., Oxford, Melbourne, and Berlin: Blackwell Publishing, 2003. viii + 424 pp. Map, bibliography, and index. \$27.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-631-23363-6.

Review by Tracey Rizzo, University of North Carolina at Asheville.

D.M.G. Sutherland's new book, *The French Revolution and Empire: The Quest for a Civic Order*, is a richer version of his earlier textbook, *France; 1789-1815* (Oxford, 1986) in which he presented a compelling case for an interpretation of the Revolution that placed provincial and rural life at the center of the story. He continues to insist that "every crisis of the Revolution after 1789 had its origin in the provinces" (p. 74). Readers will be convinced even more in this edition, which has been augmented with more powerful quotes and updated statistics. Moreover, the author indicates that most of the book has been rewritten, a reflection of the extensive outpouring of new work, including his own recently published in *Histoire et Mesure* (with T.J.A. Le Goff).

The Quest for a Civic Order is a provocative new subtitle for a work that essentially resembles its predecessor in structure and content. Organized chronologically, this book integrates the "revolution and counter-revolution" (the previous edition's subtitle) in every chapter, thus conveying the degree to which "the vast weight of ancient peasant France," a sparkling phrase from the last sentence of the first edition, "imposed itself upon the government, at the expense of many of the ideals of 1789" (p. 387). In this lies the author's central thesis which places emphasis for the trajectory of the Revolution not on ideology or political power struggles but on the socio-economic stage upon which they were enacted, and on the hostility of legislatures towards counter-revolutionary sentiments. Thus, twelve chapters chronicling the origins of the Revolution through Waterloo recount the conventional narrative beginning with the crises of the 1770s through the Fall of the Bastille, the Flight to Varennes, the Terror, the Napoleonic Wars and so on, but with an emphasis not to be found in other survey texts. For example, in the chapter "Terror and the New Republican Man," readers will be treated to more provincial examples of excess than Parisian, and to less analysis of ideology, political struggle, or the personalities of leaders, than description of the "exotic" beliefs and practices of people for whom "the pain of having normal mental universes assaulted produced something more than an equal and opposite reaction" (p. 197). The quest for a civic order, then, was ultimately a failed one, except to the degree that Napoleonic legacies informed the development of a civic order which endures up to the present time.

Indeed, this legacy should be the preoccupation of historians, far more than that of the Terror, concludes Sutherland. But "[Napoleon's legacy] is not what academic historians want to talk about" (p. 383). His disregard for such academic historians (see below) is not confined to those obsessed with the Terror. At least on particular questions he dismisses Babeuf historians (p. 280), Bonapartist historians (pp. 321; 371; 373), and Bourbon historians: "A careless historiography usually blames the Bourbons themselves...This is far too simple" (p. 377). Yet he, too, rather carelessly represents Napoleon in cliché-ridden language: "Here was a republican general who could" (p.279), who "seduced" and "dazzled" (p.

299), and who worked “old magic [which] had mesmerized him [Ney, who “melted” upon Napoleon’s return for the 100 days]” (p. 378).

Perhaps such representations serve a purpose in a survey text; indeed Sutherland’s writing style is one of the book’s strengths. Such colorful language may also reveal his orientation. After decrying historians’ neglect of the Napoleonic legacy, he adds: “The real problem then becomes why the revolution was opposed at all, how the apparent unanimity of 1789 became the snarling, ghastly series of local anti- and counter- revolutions that appeared as early as 1790” (p. 385). He leaves us with snarling and ghastly portraits throughout the book, and perhaps, as a result, with a distaste for the whole affair. Indeed, this edition is guilty of what Gary Kates said of the first which “robs the event of its dreams for a new political order.”[1]

Sutherland appears to be less interested in these “dreams” than in what actually transpired and the new edition includes statistics on violence that provide a more detailed and ultimately more chilling assessment of the Terror’s impact (pp. 203-215). Quotes too. Consider this from General Westermann, December 1793: “The Vendée is no more... I crushed children under the hoofs of my horses, massacred women who, at least for them, will not give birth to any more brigands, I took no prisoners, I exterminated them all...” (p. 209). This does not lead Sutherland to an endorsement of the genocide thesis advanced most recently by Reynald Sécher. The new edition’s three page discussion of this issue illustrates Sutherland’s skepticism about all grand theories and analogies as he urges “what needs to be understood on the Republican side is the will to slaughter,” while latter day Vendean sympathizers need to “appreciate, from the Republican point of view, the Vendéans were traitors” (p. 225).

Unfortunately, such explicit balance is not always the rule. The new edition includes expanded treatment of the “pre-Revolution” with brief discussions of the Enlightenment, political culture, including court cases and pornography (though of the latter’s influence he is skeptical), and Jansenism, reflecting the extensive additions to his bibliography. One senses that some of this is offered grudgingly, however. Indeed, he derides cultural historians’ preoccupation with the “desacralization of the monarchy.” On cultural history: “[Anti-Marxist] adepts assume that since the class struggle interpretation is untenable, a social interpretation in any form is untenable too. The defining event of the period thus becomes the assault on the monarchy” (p.14). Here he implicitly impugns the work of Jeffrey Merrick, and Lynn Hunt (“We can leave these hidden Freudian interpretations where they are, hidden”) (p. 152) with dismissive language that makes no attempt to actually engage, let alone fairly represent, their work.

Such consideration of recent historiography is new to this second edition. Dispersed throughout the text rather than confined to an introduction or a conclusion, as is more usually the case, this treatment has its strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, students will discover the extent to which many issues are contested as the narrative unfolds. On the other, they will be deprived of a thorough appraisal of other historians’ work. Indeed, the historiographic component, scattered as it is through every chapter, is my biggest criticism of the book.

I appreciate Sutherland’s defense of social history, but it comes at the expense of any respect for cultural history and a general neglect of political history. Though he directs particular ire at feminist historians (see below), no one is spared. Proponents of the classical interpretation like Soboul, Mathiez, and Lefebvre (pp. 384; 68-9; 203; 347; 150; 236), and others who are unnamed, are discussed in fragments, and their insights are so regularly dismissed that students will not grasp the meaning or the power of the Marxist interpretation from this source alone. Moreover, students and general readers are likely to find the poorly contextualized name-dropping and frequently interjected put-downs distracting at best, annoying at worst. For example, about efforts to define federalism he writes: “a great deal of historians’ efforts to link federalism, so called, with regional or provincial sentiments ought to be jettisoned as a

waste of research effort” (p. 164). Harsh words, even if the point has merit, and no historians are referenced to enable a fuller understanding of his meaning.

This is even more the case when he mentions women’s history. Though he thanks his colleagues at University of Maryland for teaching him “how women fit in,” he admits in the last line of the Introduction that he still has “to think more about this subject” (p. 4). Maintaining an openness to the insights of scholars of women’s history would be a good place to start. Instead, he writes: “Once a kind of afterthought in the narrative of a very busy year, the ‘October Days’ have become a critical source of excitement for American feminist scholars and their enthusiastic followers” (p. 74) deploying language that perpetuates the stereotypes of emotive women. He then insinuates that such scholars have over-read the event since “using women to head crowds was a common tactic...” (p. 75), as though women themselves possessed no agency as historical actors. Yet his own research challenges this premise as he regularly illustrates the prominence of women in acts defending religion. As in: “during religious disturbances, women were always at the forefront...” (p. 78). More than any other survey text, the possibilities for placing women at the center are ironically greater in this one because of his emphasis on popular actions, which is one of the reasons I regularly assigned the first edition.

I focus on these references at some length (in part because I am a member of the targeted group), but also because it illustrates a consistent tension within the book: Sutherland gratuitously dismisses the work of others even though his own conclusions do not lead in radically different directions. Indeed, I find some of his insights as well as raw material exceedingly useful in shoring up a Marxist (lite) interpretation, or even a feminist one. This apparent equivocation makes it difficult to identify Sutherland’s exact political position even though he begins this volume with the acknowledgment that “Writing a history of the Revolution is a political act” (p.1).

The only historian with whom Sutherland is actively engaged is François Furet (appropriately enough) and his consistent critique of the “totalitarian” position is almost convincing. Yet he refuses to engage the argument on its own terms, preferring to omit sustained considerations of ideology or even ideas from his synthesis, and glimpsing a version of the “thesis of circumstances,” with which he claims to disagree, as though there is no possibility for tracing a trajectory from ideas to actions, or Enlightenment to Empire.

Of course, those who endorse Furet’s position may choose to assign his *The French Revolution: 1770-1814* (Blackwell, 1996), a survey text which focuses far more on questions of politics and ideology than Sutherland’s, and which advances a critique of the Revolution now familiar to many. A more user-friendly and politically neutral text than Furet’s, though still politically oriented, is Doyle’s *Oxford History* (1989) replete with a time line, revolutionary calendar, and five maps. Unfortunately, *The French Revolution and Empire: The Quest for a Civic Order* contains only one map and no other visual aids. Those inclined to a less bulky presentation can consider Doyle’s *Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2001) as well as Popkin’s *Short History* (Prentice-Hall, 1998, 1995). Each of these contains a more accessible review of the historiography, more maps, illustrations, and time lines. Each includes discussion of the French Colonies (and it is surprising that Sutherland totally omits them given the wealth of scholarship—Carolyn Fick, David Geggus among others—which has emerged since his first edition).

At the same time, Sutherland’s work has much to recommend it. In none of the aforementioned surveys is there much discussion of the White Terror, for example. And it is here that Sutherland’s sparkling writing impresses the reader’s imagination. When discussing the “murky underbelly of fanatical royalism,” he gives the example of the Comte d’Antraigues, now described as a “melancholic bi-sexual” in the new edition (p. 283). Other counter-revolutionaries are described as members of “the most nauseating” gangs, one of their leaders “heavy-smoking, gross-mannered, and small pox ravaged” (p. 274). Moreover, his painstaking economic research in provincial archives provides advanced

undergraduates not only with a fuller picture of the Revolution, but also a glimpse at the methods, theses, and utility of economic history.

In short, Sutherland's *The French Revolution and Empire: The Quest for a Civic Order* is valuable enough that the energetic instructor who can help students make sense of the immense array of provincial detail, present the more standard political material, and clarify the historiography of the period will have at her disposal a resource rich in clever turns of phrase and moving quotes that make the period come alive.

NOTES

[1] Gary Kates, "Review of D.M.G. Sutherland, *France 1789-1815* (Oxford, 1986)," *Journal of Modern History* 60 (1988): 388.

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See also D.M.G. Sutherland's response to this review.

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