

H-France Review Vol. 4 (March 2004), No. 20

David Skuy, *Assassination, Politics, and Miracles: France and the Royalist Reaction of 1820*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003. ix + 301 pp. Figures, appendix, notes, bibliography, and index. \$75.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-7735-2457-6.

Review by Carol E. Harrison, University of South Carolina.

The compelling story of the Duke of Berry, the exiled profligate who remade himself as a model husband and, on his deathbed, a model Christian, opens David Skuy's account of the royalist reaction of 1820. Berry, like all political figures of the Restoration, carried a heavy load of revolutionary baggage. His assassination, for instance, brought together the family he had created in exile—the daughters of his invalidated marriage to an English Protestant—and the family of his improved political fortunes in France—his pregnant wife Marie-Caroline. The assassination similarly forced a confrontation between opposing interpretations of the Revolution as politicians and ordinary citizens sought to understand Berry's death and the subsequent birth of his son. Depending on one's view of the Revolution, the events of 1820 appeared to be evidence either of God's benevolence toward the Bourbons, or of the true Jacobin nature of Restoration liberals, or of an ultraroyalist cabal intent on returning to the ancien régime.

Following the prologue, which charts the revolutionary peregrinations and assassination of the duke, Skuy presents his two-pronged argument in the book's introduction. First, taking issue with Pierre Rosanvallon and Sheryl Kroen, he asserts that the Bourbon Restoration was never an "impossible monarchy." Although its foundation was shaky, Skuy maintains that the Restoration did, in the aftermath of the assassination, succeed in establishing genuine popular support. Second, Skuy maintains that the evidence of this achievement lies in an *histoire événementielle* of the royalist reaction. The politics of the nine fraught months between the assassination of the duke and the christening of his heir, the miracle child, hold the key to understanding the Restoration as a qualified success rather than as an unmitigated failure. Panic and fear of a revived republicanism, the "exceptional laws" by which ultras suspended civil liberties, muzzled the press, and further restricted the electorate, and, finally, the celebration of the birth of an heir combined to bring "millions of people back into the royalist fold.... By the end of the Royalist Reaction, the Bourbons had truly become France's royal family again" (p. 19).

Skuy follows this introduction with three chapters on the political culture of the Restoration, the first focusing on the practice of elections, the second on widespread belief in conspiracy, and the third on the nature of royalism after the Revolution. In the chapter on Restoration electoral practice, he emphasizes that the regime's most notable characteristic was "[i]ndifference to the symbolic importance of a stable and trustworthy electoral system" (p. 35). The inclination to see electoral results as the product of manipulation rather than as "the legitimate voice of the electorate" was directly related to the prevalence of conspiracy theory as a mode of political explanation. Conspiracy became a self-fulfilling prophecy: fear of conspiracy led Restoration Frenchmen to hatch their own counter-schemes, which, in turn, reinforced the general belief in the shadowy, devious nature of politics. Thus Elie Decazes, chief minister and friend of Louis XVIII, became the first victim of the royalist reaction as ultras improbably identified him as the center of a liberal conspiracy to cripple the Bourbon monarchy. Finally, in his discussion of Restoration royalism, Skuy argues that Restoration royalists presented a clearer and more compelling political philosophy than liberals. At liberalism's center was a problem: the vexed question of the true significance of the Revolution and the Napoleonic empire, to which liberals could give no single answer. Royalists, by contrast, rallied around the institutions of church and monarchy.

In the second half of the book, Skuy moves into a month-by-month treatment of the royalist reaction. Chapter four (February) covers Decazes' fall from power and panicked provincial responses to the assassination. Provincial notables sent formal expressions of condolence and calls for vengeance to the king, while local police "create[d] mountains of sedition out of molehills of suspicion" (p. 108). March and April (chapter five) saw the introduction of the first "exceptional laws" and further development of popular responses to the assassination. Skuy's treatment of this "popular element," which, he claims, "transcended the confines of politics," (p. 132) relies on print and visual media, particularly print series extolling the virtues of the duke and duchess and newspaper reports of the public subscription to construct a monument on the site of the assassination. In chapter six Skuy moves to May and June, which were occupied by debates over the law of the double vote, an attempt to solidify royalist parliamentary control by creating 172 new seats in the Chamber, to be elected in a second vote by the wealthiest 25 percent of electors from each department. Having passed the exceptional laws, ultraroyalists in August and September (chapter seven) returned to accusations of conspiracy against Decazes. In chapter eight (October-November) Skuy examines the celebration of the birth of the Duke of Bordeaux and the royalist victory in the November elections. A brief postscript discusses the Restoration's final decade and the July Revolution of 1830.

Assassination, Politics, and Miracles suffers from several flaws, both organizational and interpretive. The book's careful reconstruction of the events from February to November 1820 tends toward repetition. Because Bordeaux was born in the last days of September, Skuy begins his discussion of the miracle child at the end of chapter seven but saves the bulk of it for chapter eight. The fall of Elie Decazes is central to Skuy's synthetic chapter on conspiracy theories (chapter two), after which it reappears in chapter four (February 1820, the date of Decazes' resignation) and chapter seven (the August publication of a formal accusation of conspiracy). Although "the newspaper articles and illustrations published in February... expressed the most significant themes... that characterized and drove the Royalist Reaction over the next ten months," (p. 110) each of the five chapters that recapitulate the events of the reaction contains a separate section on media representations.

Skuy's chronological organization and his interest in political events also result in lost opportunities. The reader will find plenty of assassination and politics here, but miracles receive relatively short shrift. This is an unfortunate omission, since Skuy's argument that large sections of the French population believed in the literally miraculous nature of the Duke of Bordeaux's birth is potentially fruitful. It is an insight, however, that requires further investigation: what did it mean, in the post-revolutionary world, to believe in or to interpret divine portents? What distinguished those who believed in God's protective hand guiding French politics from those who believed in luck? Skuy gives us glimpses of French women and men doing their part to bring about a miracle: celebrating masses for the unborn child, invoking the Virgin, and celebrating the birth in the language of resurrection (pp. 202, 205). Was it a common belief in the miraculous that made the royalist reaction the last occasion on which moderate and ultra monarchists were able to cooperate? Or was faith in divine intervention in French politics primarily characteristic of Skuy's "popular element," with only limited purchase among political elites? Unfortunately, Skuy devotes little time to exploring the significance or the extent of belief in God's action in favor of the Bourbons. It is telling that, as evidence of national rejoicing at Bordeaux's birth, Skuy chooses to focus on the public subscription to purchase the château of Chambord for the infant duke. The fundraising may have expressed the nation's joy, but newspaper-driven subscription came from the repertoire of an Enlightenment public sphere. An examination of celebrations deriving from Catholic traditions might have told us more about the intersection between belief in the miraculous and Restoration politics.

Even with Skuy's meticulous recapitulation of the royalist reaction, its significance is difficult to judge. Skuy appears to see it in ironic mode: the events of 1820 "set in motion the series of events that culminated in the July Revolution" while simultaneously representing "the Bourbon regime's greatest moment of triumph.... a royalist revival that swept the nation" (p. 99). The exceptional laws, especially

the double vote, were “a disaster for the Bourbon regime” because they “symbolize[d] the regime’s supposed corrupt and reactionary character” (p. 192). Yet at nearly the same moment, the Chambord subscription “evidences a phenomenon that amounted to nothing less than a Third Restoration” (p. 212). If the nature of political legitimacy was the problem at the center of the Bourbon Restoration, it is not clear how the royalist reaction could be both the foundation of popular royalism and the beginning of the end for the Bourbon monarchy. Skuy’s treatment of the period between the royalist reaction and the July Revolution is disappointingly brief and does not resolve this contradiction. It is therefore difficult to follow him in imagining the reaction as a success when we know that the monarchy collapsed just a decade later.

Finally, this book could have profited from more careful attention from McGill-Queen’s University Press. Occasional typographical errors and at least one missing footnote (note 136, p. 174) are unfortunate. The dust jacket’s assertion that the book deals with the “psychological consequences of the assassination of the ‘miracle child’” is simply inexcusable. After all, the publisher only had to read the prologue of the book to get the facts straight.

NOTES

[1] Pierre Rosanvallon, *La Monarchie impossible: Les chartes de 1814 et de 1830* (Paris: Fayard, 1994) and Sheryl Kroen, *Politics and Theater: The Crisis of Legitimacy in Restoration France, 1815-1830* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2000).

Carol E. Harrison
University of South Carolina
ceharris@gwm.sc.edu

Copyright © 2004 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Review Vol. 4 (February 2004), No. 20

ISSN 1553-9172