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**Timothy Tackett**, *When the King Took Flight*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 2003. xi + 270pp. Maps, illustrations, abbreviations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$24.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-674-01054-X.

Review by Hugh Gough, University College, Dublin.

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Timothy Tackett is well known to historians of the French Revolution for his work on the Civil Constitution of the Clergy and the politics of the Constituent Assembly. One of the leading opponents of the revisionist school of the 1980s, he has used detailed archival research to argue for a revolution driven more by pragmatism and contingency than by ideology and semantic inevitability. This book uses a similar approach on a more precise subject, Louis XVI's flight from Paris in the summer of 1791, which ended in humiliating capture in Varennes and an enforced return to Paris. Until now, the best analysis available of Varennes and its impact was in the first part of Marcel Reinhard's book on the fall of the monarchy published over thirty years ago.<sup>[1]</sup> Tackett's book now largely replaces it and links the flight into the wider development of the Revolution from constitutional liberalism to terror.

Varennes was crucial to the development of the Revolution. Had it never happened and had the king genuinely co-operated with the Revolution, neither war nor terror might have happened and the history of Europe would have been very different. A constitutional monarchy would probably have attracted sufficient support among the propertied classes to marginalize both counter-revolutionary extremism and popular radicalism. If, on the other hand, the king had made it to his intended destination of Montmédy, the Marquis de Bouillé's 10,000 troops would have probably provided him with enough breathing space to establish a provisional government and call on the Constituent Assembly to repeal the bulk of its reforms since October 1789. The result would almost certainly have been a civil war, developing into a wider European conflict as Louis would have been forced across the frontier into the Austrian Netherlands.

Yet in the event, through his own myopia and incompetence, the king characteristically fell between the two stools. In late 1789, he had turned down repeated plans to leave Paris. Then, giving in to the queen's pleas in late 1790, he postponed the departure date repeatedly, giving time for rumours of plots and escape to spread. The implementation of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy early in 1791, and the abortive attempt to celebrate Easter in Saint-Cloud in mid-April, firmed up the decision. But when Count Axel von Fersen--the only competent person in the whole drama but one whose common sense was clouded by his infatuation with the queen--finally received the green light, the king insisted on travelling as a family group, bringing along his aunt, two nurses, a housemaid, the marquis d'Argoult, and three bodyguards, to accompany himself, Marie Antoinette, and their two children. The queen's hairdresser was mercifully sent on ahead separately, but the sheer size of the convoy made two coaches essential. To make things worse, the carriage specially built for the royal family was a luxury model, ill suited for inconspicuous or speedy travel and needing six horses to pull it. Once en route, the lumbering convoy quickly fell behind schedule and the supporting troops stationed along the route to provide protection melted away. The king made things worse by overconfidence, raising the blinds so that he could follow the journey on a map perched on his knee, and chatting to bystanders at relay stops. As a

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result the royal family was recognised at several points along the route, and the suspicions finally caught up with the convoy at Varennes. The ignominious return to Paris was the inevitable result, with the royal fugitives surrounded by members of the National Guard and thousands of onlookers.

Tackett's narrative of the flight and capture is skilfully and elegantly written. Yet the book's main strength lies in its careful contextualisation of events and the unravelling of their impact on the Revolution. A major plank in the revisionist argument has been the contention that terror and republicanism were implicit in the discourse of revolution from the autumn of 1789 onwards. Tackett rightly rejects this interpretation, pointing to the massive affection for Louis voiced in the grievance lists in 1789 and in addresses and pamphlets during the first two years of revolution. Obviously, most people believed the king when he protested his support for the Assembly's constitutional reforms. Yet the lengthy and explicit renunciation that he left behind him in the Tuileries when he fled, shattered that illusion and revealed his hypocrisy. Popular adulation turned overnight into suspicion and republicanism. Royal symbols were torn down and even the word 'royal' blacked out on hotel and shop signs with a mixture of soot and oil. The Cordeliers club and many of the popularly based 'fraternal societies' spearheaded the movement onwards in Paris, while Jacobin clubs in towns as far apart as Dole, Clermont-Ferrand, and Montpellier called for a republic. The Montpellier petition, whose importance has already been highlighted by Reinhard, found echoes in cities such as Bordeaux, Toulouse, Limoges, and Strasbourg, all of which later accepted the Assembly's decision to reinstate the king but, significantly, became involved in federalist resistance to Parisian radicalism in the summer of 1793.

Louis XVI emerges from Tackett's account as a well meaning but limited man who learnt nothing from his past mistakes. Disguised as Baron Korff, he sat in the bright yellow carriage on the road from Paris to Châlons-sur-Marne with a map on his lap, counting off the villages on the route with the same statistical obsession that he showed in hunting, and could conceive of no other political route than a return to the past. He never absorbed the depth of hostility shown towards him by crowds on the long road back to Paris, and both he and the queen were ready to risk war some months later, in the winter of 1791-92 to achieve what Varennes had failed to provide. Yet his failings were probably less significant in the medium term than the political divisions that Varennes threw up in July and August of 1791. The determination of the majority within the Assembly to save the constitution that they had laboriously drawn up, and their fear of popular republicanism, led straight to the Champ de Mars and the Jacobin club split in mid-July. The patriot movement divided irrevocably and the revolution's remorseless radicalisation began.

In retrospect, it is striking how quickly the major players in the Varennes drama were removed from the political scene. The king and queen were guillotined within a little over two years and the dauphin died in prison. Barnave and Pétion, sent by the Assembly to escort the carriages back from Varennes, were guillotined too in the autumn of 1793, and even Freshen, who masterminded the escape and escaped to Stockholm in the summer of 1792, died in a popular uprising there in 1810. Yet, if the people quickly disappeared, the impact of Varennes did not. Tackett makes a powerful case for seeing the king's flight as one of the major factors in the destabilisation of state and society that led to the Terror, and as a powerful reinforcement for the culture of conspiracy theory that was to become the common language of political analysis over the following years. His account will be essential reading for all historians of the Revolution, and the fluent manner in which it is written will make that reading a pleasure.

[1] Marcel Reinhard, *La chute de la royauté : 10 août 1792* (Editions Gallimard: Paris, 1969).

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