

H-France Review Vol. 9 (June 2009), No. 82

Robert Gildea, *Children of the Revolution: The French, 1799-1914*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008. xx + 540 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-674-03209-5.

Review by Steven Rowe, Chicago State University.

In his acknowledgements to *Children of the Revolution*, Robert Gildea notes the significance of the work of Theodore Zeldin as an inspiration for his thoughts in writing a new book on nineteenth-century France. Gildea's *Children of the Revolution* shares several things in common with Zeldin's magisterial overviews of France in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.^[1] Gildea's book is similarly ambitious in its scope and breadth to Zeldin's work, and it is also similarly difficult to classify. In a sense, Gildea's book is a work of synthesis that incorporates recent historiography with published and archival primary sources, but it is not simply another textbook on nineteenth-century France. Gildea has set out to make a specific argument about the continuing presence of the French Revolution throughout the nineteenth century, in which the conflicts of the Revolution were replayed and refracted across successive generations.

Gildea's argument is structured around five generations that each experienced and defined the conflicts inherited from the Revolution. The conflicts that he identifies were primarily political conflicts between monarchists, republicans, and Bonapartists, but Gildea also notes continuing conflicts over the influence of the Catholic Church and conflicts between national and local identities. For simplicity, he states that the members of the five generations he examines were born around 1760, 1800, 1830, 1860, and 1890, respectively, but he notes that his use of the concept of generations is historical, in that members of the same generation were defined by specific historical events that "they experienced in their formative years, or later in life" (p. 3).

Although Gildea structures his argument around these five generations, the book is organized into two parts divided at the year 1870, with part one covering 1799-1870 and part two covering 1870-1914. Each half contains seven chapters on parallel themes: national politics (chapters one and nine), national identity versus regional diversity (chapters two and ten), society and its divisions (chapters three and eleven), religion (chapters four and twelve), women and feminism (chapters five and thirteen), culture (chapters six and fourteen), and French nationalism in an international context (chapters seven and fifteen). Chapter eight on the Franco-Prussian War and the Paris Commune, located at the beginning of the second part of the book, forms a hinge between these thematically-organized chapters.

The strength of this thematic organization is that Gildea covers a wide breadth of developments in nineteenth-century France, allowing readers to examine these seven specific areas of life in France both before and after 1870. Gildea makes extensive use of personal narratives to ground his analysis of these broad themes. He has done an impressive job of culling many of these life-stories from published memoirs and autobiographies, recalling the work of Denis Bertholet.^[2] Gildea's use of memoirs and autobiographies does not approach the 358 individuals whose memoirs form the sources for Bertholet's work. However, Gildea's skillful incorporation of individual life-stories drawn from memoirs as well as

from other sources allows him to show how specific people experienced and responded to the conflicts of the nineteenth century.

For example, in his chapter on society and its conflicts in the first part of the book, Gildea draws on the memoirs of the male workers Agricol Perdiguier, Martin Nadaud, Jean-Baptiste Dumay, and Norbert Truquin to demonstrate the diversity of the French working class in the early nineteenth century.[3] In his chapter on women and feminism in this same part of the book, Gildea outlines the political activities of Suzanne Voilquin, Flora Tristan, Désirée Véret, Jeanne Deroin, and Eugénie Niboyet, but this time he draws out their life-stories from recent historiography on early socialism, feminism, and women's work. Regardless of the specific sources for the lives of these women and men, Gildea presents vivid accounts of their experiences and activities. The differences in the sources are only apparent in his notes, a tribute to Gildea's skill in creating a lively and clear narrative.

As these examples show, Gildea includes discussions of working-class women and men and their places in developments in nineteenth-century France in several chapters of this book. However, Gildea structures his argument primarily around the lives of elites, as is evident in the representatives of the five generations that he defines in his introduction. In fact, when developing his argument about how each generation struggled with the legacies of the French Revolution, Gildea relies on the political elite to define this struggle.

In the "leaders" of his fourth generation (born around 1860), for example, Gildea includes Raymond Poincaré, Louis Barthou, Joseph Caillaux, Aristide Briand, Alexandre Millerand, René Viviani, and Jean Jaurès—all of whom figure among the era's political elite (pp. 11-12). He claims that members of this generation were defined by the Dreyfus Affair of 1897-99, and yet his discussion of the Dreyfus Affair in the chapters on politics and religion during the Third Republic (chapters nine and twelve) does not demonstrate the ways this event shaped the generation of 1860. Instead, Gildea give us a fairly standard, if detailed, narrative of the Dreyfus Affair and the political history of the Third Republic. When he does specifically refer to the generation of 1860, this is secondary to his narrative, whether he is discussing politics (p. 286), feminism (p. 383), or culture (p. 396).

This is an example of the most significant weakness of Gildea's book: his argument about the inheritance of the conflicts of the Revolution being played out in the lives of members of five generations is not used consistently to structure his analysis and narrative. At times, his specific narrative or analysis seems to be in tension with this larger argument, indicating the argument's insufficiency for encompassing the rich history that Gildea wants to convey in his thematically-organized chapters. This is most apparent in his discussions of working-class women and men, as noted above, whose experiences do not seem to represent the kinds of conflicts that Gildea wants to emphasize as the inheritance of the Revolution.[4]

When Gildea does rely on his argument to frame his narrative, he makes several interesting points that suggest the potential this argument has as an interpretative framework for analyzing nineteenth-century France. Perhaps the strongest example of this occurs at the very end of the book, where Gildea uses the life of the writer Charles Péguy (a member of the generation of 1890) to illustrate his argument that the divisions of the Revolution were overcome by the time of World War I. Péguy's publication of *La Mystère de la charité de Jeanne d'Arc* in 1910 had increased his popularity and associated him with the nationalist cause, an association furthered by his death fighting at the Battle of the Marne in 1914. Gildea makes a convincing case that Péguy represented a resolution to many of the conflicts of the Revolution as "a republican, dreyfusard and socialist but also a Catholic and attached to the values of old France" (p. 439). Péguy also represents Gildea's best use of his argument in its strongest fashion, tying together larger political and cultural developments in the life of a particular individual. It is also perhaps the most contentious point of Gildea's larger argument, and many historians would critique his claim that the Revolution's conflicts had been resolved by the onset of World War I. However, this

claim of resolution is less important to Gildea's book than his desire to argue the centrality of the conflicts of the Revolution in framing the history of France in the nineteenth century.

This argument may not be controversial for specialists in nineteenth-century French history, but it could be particularly thought-provoking if Gildea was able to link it more clearly to the different areas of life he explores. He is certainly able to show conflicts among artists from the specific generations of 1800, 1830, and 1860. Unfortunately, Gildea does not link these cultural conflicts, like the conflicts within society, to the inheritance of the Revolution. While this may weaken the effectiveness of his larger argument, perhaps this tension between the argument and the content of the narrative is ultimately more productive than problematic. It reveals the difficulty of reducing the complex history of France in the nineteenth-century to one larger frame.

The tensions between the argument and the narrative could certainly be explored in a graduate course, or perhaps an upper-level undergraduate course, but would probably be too difficult to deal with in most other undergraduate courses. Gildea's frequent use of French terms without translation might also put off many undergraduate students. Gildea's book would certainly be useful for scholars who are not specialists in modern French history, particularly because of its incorporation of much recent historiography and its breadth of coverage. Its level of detail might be daunting at times, but Gildea's fluid prose and thematic organization do much to aid in comprehending the complexity of the history he covers.

NOTES

[1] See Theodore Zeldin, *France, 1848-1945*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973-77) and *The French* (New York: Pantheon Book, 1982).

[2] Denis Bertholet, *Les Français par Eux-Mêmes, 1815-1885* (Paris: Olivier Orban, 1991).

[3] Translated selections from all four of these male workers' memoirs have been published in Mark Traugott, ed. and trans., *The French Worker: Autobiographies from the Early Industrial Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[4] Several historians have linked working-class life and its conflicts in nineteenth-century France to the inheritance of the Revolution, specifically linking the French working classes to political conflicts in the nineteenth century. One recent interesting book to do this is Casey Harison, *The Stonemasons of Creuse in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008), where he examines the evolution of a contentious relationship between migrant stonemasons and the police that was tied to the stonemasons' association with the Place de Grève, which had inherited strong political symbolism from the Revolution.

Steven E. Rowe
Chicago State University
s-rowe@csu.edu

Copyright © 2009 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