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Vivian R. Gruder, *The Notables and the Nation. The Political Schooling of the French, 1787-1788*. Cambridge, Mass. and London, Harvard University Press, 2007. x + 495 pp. Map, illustrations, appendices, notes, index. \$59.95 (hb.) ISBN 978 0 674 02534 9.

Review essay by William Doyle, University of Bristol.

Ever since the Fifth International Congress on the Enlightenment in 1979 scholars interested in the transition between the Ancien Regime and the French Revolution have been aware that Vivian Gruder was working on the Assemblies of Notables of 1787 and 1788, their background and their significance. Over that time, a regular sequence of articles and conference contributions has announced her findings, and this book brings them all together. Seven of its thirteen chapters are in fact expanded or amended versions of previous articles. The footnotes present impressive evidence of exhaustive reading in the sources for the state of public opinion in France over the two years preceding the convocation of the Estates-General. Gruder's main conclusion is that the scale of political mobilisation effected during this period was so massive and unprecedented that it should be regarded as the first phase of the Revolution proper rather than merely the "pre"-revolution it was dubbed by Jean Egret over half a century ago.

The text is divided into three sections. The first, and oldest in terms of the sequence of previous publication, consists of three chapters on the Assemblies of Notables themselves, emphasising how their members saw themselves as deliberating under the eyes of a wider, critical public. Gruder insists that the first Notables were not simply concerned to defend entrenched privileges against reform of any sort. She shows how some of the most vocal and active members had given sustained and constructive thought to public affairs over the preceding years. The ins and outs of everyday politics in the Assembly are not her prime concern. She is much more interested in the Notables' "mental world" (p.36). But this approach has its costs. Readers unfamiliar with the outline of events during and between the two Assemblies will struggle with allusions which crowd almost every page in this and the other two sections. The personal ambitions and antagonisms of the participants, which did so much to bring down Calonne and to motivate Brienne, are not discussed at all. Necker, not a member but a figure whose own ambitions and analyses hung over much of the first Assembly's deliberations, receives only a fleeting mention. He gets more when it comes to the second Assembly, which after all was his idea. But there is very little sense of the turbulent developments between May 1787 and October 1788 which had transformed the political situation completely, not to mention the simple fact that a significant proportion of the second Assembly's members had not been in the first. So far from setting the scene, therefore, these three chapters read more like the disparate pieces they originally were than a sustained argument.

There is much more coherence to the second, and much the longest, section, on "the Media and the Public." Each of the six chapters is devoted to a survey of one of the various channels by which the nation was informed about the Notables and the issues they were confronting. They cover newspapers, gazettes, French language journals of record and of opinion published abroad, *nouvelles à la main*, pamphlets, prints, and festivities marking the return of popular

heroes like the magistrates of the exiled parlements, or the fall of unpopular ministers. Most of them, Gruder argues, reflected public opinion as much as they led or moulded it. What her analyses cumulatively show is a government steadily losing control of the media, even when it was trying, as in May to August 1788, to reassert it. It was also losing the argument, as a national consensus emerged in favour of entrusting the state's problems to the wisdom of the Estates-General. Yet there was no marked loss of faith in either monarchy or the king personally. Gruder, quite rightly, has no time for that false friend of too many recent historians of the period, "desacralisation." The determination of the second Notables to stick with the Forms of 1614 for the organisation of the Estates deflected any potential discontent from the king towards the privileged orders who seemed to be obstructing his benevolent intentions. Loss of faith in monarchy would be the work of the Revolution, not one of its causes. On the other hand, emerging in tandem with the consensus was a reflex of intolerance towards disagreement which would fatefully mark so much of revolutionary discourse and underpin increasingly authoritarian policies and the drift towards terror. Here Gruder is much more in tune with recent fashions, rooting this ominous strain in centuries of Catholic intolerance and deep ancestral fears of division and civil war.

Public opinion and its development, Gruder's true quarry, emerge overwhelmingly as the preserve of the leisured and the educated. This is scarcely surprising intuitively, but a useful brief chapter on subscription lists and where and by whom the printed word was read provides firm evidence to confirm it. While disclaiming any aspiration to precision in light of the paucity of hard statistical information, this chapter nevertheless offers a useful summary of what we know about who the consumers of media were on the eve of the Revolution. Yet Gruder is anxious for more. She wants to know how far the political consciousness emerging during the terminal crisis of the Ancien Regime penetrated below the level of the formally educated. Two of the three chapters in the third section, "At the Grass Roots," look into this problem. One examines seventy pamphlets, broadsides and almanacs seemingly aimed, through their direct language, simple ideas, shortness and low price, at a more popular audience. It finds that they were very effective in mobilising opinion outside the elite behind the call for the Estates-General and, subsequently, the doubling of the Third and vote by head. They did not in themselves express some authentically independent popular voice, but the echoes they aroused, Gruder argues, can be found throughout the language and demands of Third Estate *cahiers* during the spring of 1789. And what about illiterate peasants, far from the centres of political action and often speaking and thinking in their impenetrable *patois*? Gruder has only found two pamphlets specifically directed at rustics and claiming to express their concerns. She glosses them at length, but in the end has to admit that they can underpin no firm general conclusions. Once again, it is the *cahiers* which are invoked as evidence of prior peasant engagement with public issues.

This is a book steeped in the sources and determined to convey the full subtlety and range of the opinions expressed in them. It is perhaps too anxious to get everything in. A highly unconvincing case is made, for example (p.140), for classing Siméon-Prosper Hardy's famous manuscript diary "Mes Loisirs" as *nouvelles à la main* because it "may have been" available to the customers in his bookshop. Everybody who knows the period will agree that Hardy is a wonderfully quotable source for public affairs and their reception over this period and long beforehand, but the contents of his journal offer no evidence that they were intended for anything other than their author's own satisfaction. Another example is the introduction of Necker's *Administration des Finances* in the middle of the chapter on 'popular' pamphlets (pp. 285-8), on the tenuous grounds that this three-volume work was a bestseller and thus popular. This is to place far too much weight on the ambiguities of the word. Dense and full as the eighty-six pages of notes are, there is surely scope for banishing yet further material to them in order to unclutter the text and make salient conclusions stand out more clearly. But never before

has the ferment of public discussion unleashed by the convocation of the Notables been so fully anatomised. Gruder's researches should banish once and for all the (never very persuasive) notion that it is enough to characterise the politics of this period simply as an aristocratic revolt.

William Doyle
University of Bristol
William.Doyle@bristol.ac.uk

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