Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: the Construction of the French Past*, vol. III, *The Symbols*. English language edition edited by Laurence D. Kritzman. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. New York and Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 1998. ix + 751 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. $37.50 US (cl). ISBN 0-231-10926-1.

Review by James A. Leith, Queen's University (Canada), for H- France, April 1999.

Historians of France will mostly already be familiar with the three volumes entitled *Lieux de memoire* under the direction of Pierre Nora published between 1984 and 1992. The English translations have been rather slow to appear, but are now complete with the publication last year of the third volume.(1) The translations will make some of the articles available to a wider audience, especially to undergraduates. Readers should be warned, however, that the volumes have different titles, the articles appear in different volumes, and some articles have been deleted. Here under the rubric *Symbols* are grouped seventeen articles in three sections. The section on Emblems covers the tricolour flag, the Marseillaise, the slogan "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity", and Bastille Day. The second section on Major Sites covers Lascaux, Reims, the Louvre, Versailles, the Pantheon, the Eiffel Tower, and Verdun. Then the third section "Identifications" (a term that will seem strange to many Anglophones) covers the Gallic Cock, Joan of Arc, Descartes, Paris, the French language, and the Era of Commemoration. All these topics excite one's interest, but there are serious problems with the theoretical underpinning and with the individual chapters.

The problems with this volume begin with the conceptual framework put forward in the introduction by the editor. Pierre Nora argues that behind the obvious choice of subjects-- emblems, major sites, and historical personalities--lies the question of what is the symbolic dimension of such symbols. Instead of discussing the nature of symbols, how they work on the human mind, and why they have proved useful to various religious and political movements throughout history, he contends that the topics of the book mask two different kinds of symbols: imposed and constructed. In his view state symbols are imposed symbols of the purest type. In their case a symbolic and memorial intention is inscribed in the object itself and the historian's task is to trace the various forms and vicissitudes of that intention. He adds that state symbols are not the only examples of imposed symbols. The Pantheon and the Eiffel Tower were also conceived from the first as symbols, memorials, and monuments.

All this is questionable. The division of imposed symbols and constructed ones is largely a distinction without a difference. Nora's argument glosses over the fact that the symbols imposed by the state were not selected arbitrarily, but had been formed and gained significance over a long period of time. The major symbols chosen at the time of the definitive establishment of the Republic around 1880--the tricolour flag,

the Marseillaise as a national anthem, the Bastille Day as a national holiday, and the motto "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity"--all had evolved (a better word in my opinion than constructed) over almost a century. The creation of the Pantheon during the Revolution was the culmination of a demand for a shrine to honour great men that had been growing for generations. Even the Eiffel Tower of 1889, as close to a pure sign as any other symbol, was the product of umpteen proposals for a tower going back at least as far as 1789. It is difficult to distinguish these symbols from the ones which Nora lists as constructed ones such as the Gallic Cock.

Even more problematical is Nora's contention that France exists nowadays only through important emblems, symbolic sites, and memories of historic personalities. While conceding that the emergence of the European community, various international agencies, and globalized trade have made national frontiers less important, it seems to be going too far to argue as Nora does that the object "France" no longer makes sense as a unit of study and that it is only in memory that the concepts of cohesiveness, unity, and continuity retain their pertinence and legitimacy. Such a contention seems to ignore the fact that France has had a distinct territory for centuries, has a highly centralized national government, a unified administrative system, a common tax system, a network of schools, a national rail, highway and postal system. I think that French citizens paying income taxes and TVA would not be impressed with the argument that France is now "purely problematical" except for the memories perpetuated and rekindled by symbolic history. And I am making this counter argument as someone who has written extensively about symbols, monuments, and myths and consequently is not inclined to minimize their role.

The preoccupation with memory throughout obscures the importance of its opposite in nation-building: forgetting. Like most European countries, the unification and expansion of France entailed a lot of violence and suppression of opposition, now better played down for the sake of national unity. Nation- building has also involved the gradual assimilation of linguistic minorities, using compulsory education as a principal weapon. Moreover, as France moved through various forms of monarchy, empire, and republic, the triumph of certain symbols has involved the obliteration or neglect of others. This explains why among symbolic sites the basilica of *Sacre-Coeur* is missing while the Pantheon gets a whole chapter. There was a long struggle by devout Catholics beginning in the seventeenth century to make the Sacred Heart into a national symbol. During the Revolution the Sacred Heart was used as a symbol of opposition to the Republic. In the nineteenth century the Sacred Heart competed vigorously with Marianne. This movement culminated in the building of the basilica atop Montmartre. Today many people are familiar with the shrine, but know little of its origins or significance. It has failed in its purpose because of the triumph of

republicanism and secularism. Perhaps Nora could give us a complementary series on *lieux d'oubli*.

Moreover, since this is a translation from a French text written some time ago and reviewed often, it is surprising that there are so many errors. If one is writing about symbols, one should look at them carefully, but frequently the text and the images contradict each other. The problem begins early: in the first chapter, an article on the tricolour by Raoul Girardet, the author uses a reproduction of a painting of the Declaration of the Rights of Man (fig. 1.0) in which there is a winged figure on the upper right which he calls the Spirit of the Enlightenment. He states that this allegorical figure is holding a torch, whereas the reader can see she is holding a sceptre. The light which dominates the top of the painting radiates out, not from a torch, but from an equilateral triangle with an eye in the centre, symbol of the Eternal. There are many such incorrect descriptions of the plates. In the article on the motto "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity" a design for a timbre by Augustin Dupre (fig. 3.2) is labelled c. 1790, whereas it was part of a series designed in Year II. In other cases the illustrations are reversed (fig. 12:13 and 12:14). These errors are surprising in a work with such pretensions.

There are also serious errors in the texts by distinguished historians. In his piece on the *Marseillaise* Michel Vovelle tells us that the rival *Internationale* was written by Eugene Poittier in 1888, whereas it was written late in the Commune. Edouard Pommier informs us that Lebrun's painting of "The Crossing of the Rhine" shows the river as an old man who spitefully overturns an urn, whereas it is well known that *fleuves* (unlike ordinary rivers) are invariably shown as old men and rivers are almost always symbolized by urns spilling water. Mona Ozouf speaks of "the chain of statues" on the *Place des Victoires* which fails to make clear that the famous statues by Desjardins around the base of the statue of Louis XIV were in chains. She also tells us that the remains of Mirabeau were spirited out a side door of the Pantheon at the very moment when Jean-Paul Marat's entered by the main entrance. She is relying on a proposal by Jacques Louis David on 24 Brumaire Year II, but this was not implemented. The remains of Marat were not Panthionized until the fifth Sansculottide of Year II. Ozouf again uses a speech by David to discuss the festival planned for the Pantheonization of the remains of the young Republican martyrs Joseph Bara and Joseph-Agricole Viala, but that festival was cancelled because of the overthrow of Maximilien Robespierre.

Despite the problems of the theoretical framework, the inaccurate description of some symbols, and simple factual errors, all the articles deserve reading. They look at France from various vantage points. Especially interesting are the articles on the checkered history of the Tricolour, the contested history of the omnipresent motto of the Republic, the partial failure of the Pantheon, the changing views of the Eiffel

Tower, and the strange history of the Gallic Cock. None of the articles fails to arouse interest.

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(1)James A. Leith's review of Arthur Goldhammer's translation of essays from *Les Lieux de Memoire* implies that the English translation of this monumental work is now complete. In fact it is not yet at the halfway mark. Columbia University Press has published three volumes drawn from the the seven-volume French work. The University of Chicago Press will publish four more volumes over the next few years, beginning in the Spring of 2000 with *Memory of France: Les Lieux de Memoire, Volume 1: The State* under the editorship of David P. Jordan.

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