

Norman Hampson, *The Perfidy of Albion: French Perceptions of England during the French Revolution*. London: Macmillan & New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998. xiii + 181 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$59.95 US (cl). ISBN 0-333-73148-4.

Review by Thomas E. Kaiser, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, for H-France, March 1999.

After being relegated to the sidelines for the past seventy-five years, the field of international relations is once again attracting the attention of eighteenth-century French historians, one of whom has gone so far as to endorse the ancient credo regarding "the primacy of foreign policy." (1) Like many other revivals of once thriving and then rather neglected areas of history, this one involves no mere return of the repressed. Rather, it has led to the study of matters which, though not altogether neglected by past masters like Albert Sorel, were ignored in most earlier approaches to the subject. In particular, the newer histories of foreign relations have sought to infuse the study of diplomatic exchanges, treaties, alliances, and wars, and other venerable targets of historical inquiry with those that have concerned more recent historians of political culture--political discourse, national images, and the dynamics of public opinion. (2) As a result of this broadening of the field, fresh opportunities have been created to explore the interaction of foreign policy and domestic politics as they determined the course of the French Revolution.

A veteran historian of eighteenth-century French politics and culture, Norman Hampson has taken a methodologically modest step in the direction of the new study of foreign relations in this short work, which focuses primarily on French perceptions of Britain and secondarily on British perceptions of France during the Revolutionary decade. While the author's chosen topic puts him in the universe of innovators, the work is conspicuous for the absence of attention to "discourse" and for the relatively narrow approach Hampson takes to the study of public opinion, which relies mostly upon the writings and speeches of major authors and Revolutionary leaders. It is narrow, too, in that the author deals almost exclusively with perceptions of British and French politics, saying very little about perceptions of artistic, scientific, or other cultural developments. Within these confines, Hampson sketches out an argument which is generally compelling, if not wholly unpredictable.

Before 1789, Hampson contends, French views of the British political system broke down into roughly three categories: the view that it was the embodiment of liberty; the view that it was morally flawed for its alleged "corruption"; and the view that it was not wholly without merit, but was becoming obsolete as a result of progress in the human sciences. In a particularly interesting chapter--which really says more about the malleability of political convictions than it does about French public opinion as a whole--the author shows that adoption of any of these views before 1789 was not a

reliable indicator of political position once the Revolution began. Maximilien Robespierre never much liked the British political system, whereas Jean-Paul Marat, who spent ten years in England, developed a high enough regard for its political institutions to recommend them to his countrymen in 1789, as did the *Monarchien* Jean-Joseph Mounier. The coming of the Revolution, the author shows, drove the two nations into a closer embrace than had existed for some time. While British government ministers welcomed the chaos that promised to incapacitate French diplomatic initiatives, the British public saw in the events of 1789 the prelude to a rapprochement of two nations bound by a common devotion to freedom. In France, suspicions remained greater. Anglophilia rapidly became associated with the center-right, while the wave of Revolutionary institutional change promoted condescension towards the more "backward" British. And yet, Hampson points out, the Revolutionaries did offer Albion a tribute of sorts by measuring France's new institutions more against those of Britain than against those of any other nation. Moreover, despite strains caused by the Nootka Sound incident of 1790--a conflict arising out of Spain's efforts to gain French support of colonial claims contested by Britain--diplomatic relations had rarely been better.

These good relations even survived the French declaration of war on Francis II, King of Hungary and Bohemia, in April 1792, when missions were sent by the faction associated with Jacques Pierre Brissot to cement firmer alliances with Britain and Prussia. What, then, led to the breakdown in relations later that year? Hampson convincingly argues that it was a mix of domestic factors and foreign policy considerations. The September massacres, he contends, forever tainted the French Revolution in Britain, allowing the Tories to blacken the reputation of the Whigs, who had hitherto defended the Revolution, and to smear the radicals, who had identified themselves publicly with the Jacobins. In recalling their ambassador upon Louis's suspension from his duties in August, the British not only broke off formal diplomatic relations but also advertised their disdain for the new French republic. The Convention's decision to annex Savoy and its threats to Belgian independence only provided more grist for the propaganda mill of the Tories, who made little effort to stop the drift to war. Indeed, admitting that there was no real internal threat, William Pitt singled out French expansionism as the principal reason for hostilities, should they come.

France's declaration of war on Britain in February 1793 formalized a rupture in relations which had already effectively occurred, prompting both sides to fantasize about the perfidy of the other. Drawing upon suspicions which had never completely expired, the French perceived the long hand of Pitt in virtually every setback suffered by the republic, while, beset with factional rivalries, they slandered one another as secret agents of the "New Carthage" (Hampson makes an heroic effort to elicit the

truth from the tangled web of charges and counter-charges regarding collusion with the British that was spun during the Terror, paying particular attention to the intrigues of the British undercover agent baron de Batz.). At the same time, the British--professing fear of secret agents less than fear of offensive doctrines--found new wisdom in Edmund Burke's hitherto unheeded warnings about the Revolution's threat to civilization, from which Pitt crafted an ideological bogeyman to curb the civil liberties of his opponents. During the Directory, the moderating political climate in France and the growing belief in Britain that civilization could survive the "sophisters" Burke had decried might have produced a lessening of tensions. But instead, Hampson concludes, the prolongation of war and its subsequent recurrence under the enlightened despot Napoleon only intensified them. As he so nicely puts it, "St. George had got his dragon back" (p. 165).

The virtues of this book are considerable. The author navigates the twists and turns of domestic and foreign politics with a sure hand, and he tells his story with clarity and wit. If the book does not uproot orthodoxy in its overall argument, the author makes a number of important revisionary points along the way--noting, for example, the greater consistency with which Marat opposed war than did Robespierre, who is usually singled out in this respect. Any future student of the material covered by the author will clearly have to use Hampson's conclusions as points of departure.

At the same time, the book has its weaknesses. Among the relatively minor ones, it under-recognizes the work of Jean-Louis Delolme, whose treatise *The Constitution of England*, published in multiple French and English editions, had greater impact on pre-Revolutionary continental views of British politics, according to R. R. Palmer, than did the *Spirit of the Laws*.<sup>(3)</sup> More significantly, the work does not flesh out the ideological content of French Anglo-philia and -phobia nearly so much as it might have, particularly given the important leads provided by many scholars of the pre-Revolutionary period. A fuller exploration of the ideological depths might have led to a sounder conclusion than the one on p. 162, which contrasts pre- and post-Revolutionary Anglophobia by saying that before 1789 it was chiefly directed against the government, while the French image of the Briton as "proud, devious, essentially preoccupied with his own material advantage, the eternal enemy" was a Revolutionary product. In fact, pre-Revolutionary French descriptions of British society--its alleged rank commercialism and violent sectarian struggles--were far "thicker" and sometimes more unflattering than, say, contemporary French accounts of the Germans, which typically consisted of little more than the saga of their rulers. French Anglophilia was rarely undiluted, as Keith Baker has demonstrated in the case of Montesquieu.<sup>(4)</sup> As for the supposedly Anglophilic Voltaire, his description of Britain--much like bishop Jacques- Benigne Bossuet's--as a "land of sects" was no simple encomium.<sup>(5)</sup> In other words, the Anglophobic continuities might well be greater than the author indicates, a

point that a forthcoming essay by David Bell on the "savage" image of Britain in pre-Revolutionary French war propaganda re-enforces. Finally, one could have wished for a fuller juxtaposition of Revolutionary Anglophobia with other forms of xenophobia, especially Austrophobia. It was, after all, allegations of Austrian aggression and subversion which provided ideological cover for the Brissotin drive to war in 1792, even if Pitt emerged as the chief demon later on. A year before the arch-Anglophobe Bertrand Barere called for the extinction of the English race, he paired "the guile of Vienna" with "the corruption of the court of Saint James" (p. 106). Such an association raises the critical question of what connection he and the French generally imagined between the two threats. A fuller appreciation of the ideological dimension, which tends to get eclipsed in this book by the play of factional interests, might have provided answers to this question and produced a rounder picture of French perceptions of diplomatic relations.

These reservations aside, this book is an important one, suggesting how much greater is the universe of foreign relations than is dreamed of by those who consider such matters the affair of ministers and courts alone.

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#### Notes

1. T. C. W. Blanning, *The French Revolutionary Wars, 1787-1802* (London & New York, 1996), p. xv.
2. Examples include Orville T. Murphy, *The Diplomatic Retreat of France and Public Opinion on the Eve of the French Revolution, 1783-1789* (Washington, D.C., 1998), and Thomas E. Kaiser, "The Drama of Charles Edward Stuart, Jacobite Propaganda, and French Political Protest, 1745-1750," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 30 (1997): 365-81.
3. R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: The Challenge*, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1959), I, p. 145.
4. Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge & New York, 1990), pp. 173-85.
5. Voltaire, *Lettres philosophiques ou lettres anglaises avec le texte complet des remarques sur les Pensees de Pascal* (Paris, 1988), p. 23.

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