

H-France Review Vol. 11 (October 2011), No. 219

Ethel Groffier, *Un encyclopédiste réformateur: Jacques Peuchet (1758-1830)*. Québec City: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2009. 440 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. 39.95\$CA (pb). ISBN 978-2-7637-8898-2.

Review by Jeremy L. Caradonna, University of Alberta

How does one biographize the mediocre, the commonplace, the unexceptional? How does one find the extraordinary within the ordinary?

Ethel Groffier offers answers to these questions in her new biography<sup>[1]</sup> of Jacques Peuchet (1758-1830), a minor man of letters, tireless lexicographer, and career bureaucrat who lived through the tumultuous years of the Revolution, the Empire, and the Restoration. What is interesting about Peuchet, as a subject of biography, is that he was neither a Napoleon-esque “great man” nor the everyman in the mould of Menocchio or Jacques-Louis Ménétra. He never published a best seller, denounced an enemy, or won a battle. He wasn't even low enough on the social scale to be considered a hack—but neither did he enjoy an established reputation. He was simply a scribe—*homo bureaucrat*—who kept his head down during the Revolution (and, as a result, kept it attached to his shoulders). Perhaps his greatest claim to fame is that his posthumously published (and heavily editorialized) *Mémoires tirés des archives de la police de Paris* provided scintillating material for Alexandre Dumas' *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo*.

It is rather apt that no images of Peuchet have survived to the present day. His life (and the documentary record of it) is marked more by absence than presence. Although he wrote mounds of reference works, he left very few traces of his personal life, and he rarely wrote in an autobiographical mode. Because of this dearth of sources, Groffier is forced to write an intellectual biography of Peuchet, centered on published sources, which one might liken to the biography of Descartes written by Stephen Gaukroger a few years back.<sup>[2]</sup> The book includes an opening chapter that sketches out the contours of Peuchet's complicated life. The remaining chapters analyze and contextualize Peuchet's writings, which touched on subjects as diverse as public administration (*la police*), commerce, economics, history, poverty, animal rights, social reform, and statistics.

In the opening chapter, we learn that Peuchet wore many hats. As a young man he studied law and occasionally found work as a jurist. Before and during the Revolution, he worked as a journalist for such periodicals as the *Moniteur universel*, the *Mercure de France*, and the *Gazette officielle de France*, often collaborating with the irascible and ubiquitous Abbé Morellet. Peuchet, who referred to himself as a man of letters, probably earned his greatest recognition as a lexicographer. The number of critical dictionaries that he wrote puts Pierre Bayle to shame. Examples of his reference works include his *Dictionnaire de l'Assemblée nationale et constituante*, *Dictionnaire de police et municipalités*, and his *Dictionnaire universel de la géographie commerçante*. Although he never wrote for the original *Encyclopédie*, he contributed articles to Panckoucke's *Encyclopédie méthodique*, which is why Groffier refers to Peuchet as an “encyclopédist.” He also made money as a statistician, and Groffier argues that Peuchet helped developed the fledgling

study of statistics in the early nineteenth century, publishing yet more reference works on the “general statistics” of France.

His most consistent day job throughout this period, though, was as a bureaucrat in various administrative departments. Indeed, it would appear that Peuchet may even have invented (or at least popularized) the word *burocratie*, a term which he defined (rather negatively) in one of his dictionaries (p. 59). During the pre-Revolution, he worked for Calonne and Loménie de Brienne as a political administrator. In 1789, he became involved in the voting for the Estates-General in Paris and wound up as a municipal administrator on Bailly’s staff. In 1791-1792, he worked as a *secrétaire rapporteur* for the *commission de police* within the Paris Commune, where his preference for constitutional monarchy incurred the suspicion of local authorities. After the fall of the monarchy on 10 August 1792, Peuchet was arrested and imprisoned before an anonymous protector secured his quick release. During the Terror, Peuchet wisely took refuge in a small town north of Paris, but his need for work drove him back into an administrative position. Although nominally a Jacobin, he privately expressed his hostility toward the excesses of the Jacobin regime. Under the Directory, he worked for the Ministry of Justice, helping to decide whether the *émigrés* should be allowed to return to France, and in the early nineteenth century he worked for the *conseil de commerce* under the umbrella of the Ministry of the Interior.

Most striking about Peuchet’s life was his ability to maintain his livelihood through the difficult years of the Revolution. In terms of the historiography, one might relate Groffier’s book to James Livesey’s work on François de Neufchâteau and the notion of a “revolutionary career.”[3] How did bureaucrats, administrators, and politicians navigate the political minefield of the Revolution? How and why were some individuals able to achieve career growth amidst the frequent political disruptions of the period? When asked what he did during the Terror, the abbé Sieyès famously responded, “J’ai vécu.” Jacques Peuchet did exactly the same. Indeed, Peuchet might even be thought of as a kind of bureaucratic version of Sieyès—a careerist who always managed to cozy up to the new regime. From the 1770s to his death in 1830, Peuchet was always able to *gagner sa vie*. One might also relate this work to other biographies of middlebrow Enlightenment figures, such as Laurence Brockliss’s *Calvet’s Web* or Darline Gay Levy’s *The Ideas and Careers of Simon-Nicolas-Henri Linguet*. [4]

Although Peuchet’s writings reveal a consistent taste for the factual, the statistical, and the well balanced, Groffier shows that Peuchet harbored fairly radical reformist ideas. He wrote critical works about the status of bastards and *enfants-trouvés*, about gender and social inequality, and even about the need to extend personal rights to animals. Before 1789, he advocated for social and administrative reform and the need for more liberty and transparency within government. He reserved some of his most critical remarks for the French bureaucracy that he knew all too well: “Je ne crois pas, en effet, qu’il existe un État où l’influence du système bureaucratique soit aussi sensible, aussi absurde, aussi étendue, qu’en France” (p. 59). Like a good Enlightenment *philosophe*, he also maintained a lifelong hostility toward despotism, persecution, and inequality. One of Peuchet’s most interesting political positions related to the question of tolerance. In an age when most progressive philosophers lauded the concept of religious tolerance, Peuchet argued, on the contrary, that so-called tolerance was merely a form of permanent inequality that made second-class citizens of religious minorities: “Je ne viens pas prêcher la tolérance. La liberté la plus illimitée de religion est à mes yeux un droit si sacré, que le mot tolérance, qui essaye de l’exprimer, me paraît en quelque sorte tyrannique lui-même, puisque l’existence de l’autorité qui a le pouvoir de tolérer attente à la liberté de penser, par cela même qu’elle tolère, et qu’elle pourrait ne pas tolérer.”

Peuchet’s argument about tolerance is extremely unusual for the eighteenth century and precedes by two hundred years similar arguments made by the political theorist Wendy Brown

in *Regulating Aversion*.<sup>[5]</sup> His views on tolerance vis-à-vis those of Locke and Voltaire certainly warrant further analysis.

The main criticism of Groffier's book is that the author could have drawn important lessons from the growing theoretical literature that deals with historical biography. According to Jo-Burr Margadant, a pioneer of the New Biography, the subject of biography is "no longer the coherent self but rather a self that is performed to create an impression of coherence or an individual with multiple selves whose different manifestations reflect the passage of time, the demands and options of different settings, or the varieties of ways that others seek to represent that person."<sup>[6]</sup> Since Peuchet rarely wrote about himself, this criticism is not entirely applicable. Yet Groffier nonetheless could have improved her biography by reading Jo-Burr Margadant's *The New Biography*, Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Fernandez-Armesto's *Columbus*, and many other works which seek to complicate the notion that texts provide transparent windows onto authentic historical selves. I would have liked to have seen closer attention paid to the ways in which Peuchet consciously constructed a particular self-representation through his published works. How did Peuchet present and represent himself in print? Did he have a fragmented self? What might he have wanted his readers to think (or not think) about him? These are questions that Groffier could have answered more directly.

Other than that, the book is highly readable, well referenced, and well contextualized. Groffier does an excellent job of situating all aspects of Peuchet's thought in linguistic and intellectual contexts. The text is engaging even in the long passages that deal with Peuchet's bureaucratic career and his work on social statistics. This work will certainly remain the last word on Peuchet for a long time to come, and it should generate interest from scholars of the Enlightenment, the Revolutionary period, and even political theorists interested in reevaluating the utility of the concept of tolerance.

#### NOTES

[1] Groffier denies that her book has a "prétention biographique." Yet the work is closer to a biography—an intellectual biography—than any other genre. After all, the book focuses exclusively on the life and works of a single individual.

[2] Stephen Gaukroger, *Descartes: An Intellectual Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[3] James Livesey, "A Revolutionary Career? François de Neufchâteau Does Well by Doing Good, 1774–1794," *French History* 18:2 (2004): 173–195

[4] Laurence Brockliss, *Calvet's Web: Enlightenment and the Republic of Letters in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Darline Gay Levy, *The Ideas and Careers of Simon-Nicolas-Henri Linguet: A Study in Eighteenth-Century French Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980).

[5] Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008).

[6] Jo-Burr Margadant, ed., *The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth-Century France* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), p.7.

---

Jeremy L. Caradonna  
University of Alberta  
[caradonn@ualberta.ca](mailto:caradonn@ualberta.ca)

Copyright © 2011 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 edistribution/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