

H-France Review Vol. 11 (January 2011), No. 21

Doina Pasca Harsanyi, *Lessons from America. Liberal French Nobles in Exile 1793-1798*. Pennsylvania State University Press, Philadelphia, 2010. 204 pp. \$80.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-271-03637-3.

Review by Kirsty Carpenter, Massey University, New Zealand.

The French émigrés during the Revolution spread out across Europe settling in capital cities and their surrounding areas from Russia to Madrid. Doina Pasca Harsanyi, herself an émigré from Europe to America last century, follows the path of those whose *périples* took them as far as America. This study offers insights into the world that confronted a small group of Frenchmen as it was reflected in their biographies and correspondence. It links a group of men who had in common their liberal approaches in politics, their aristocratic background, and the fact that they spent time in America during their emigration. They did not travel together but congregated in Philadelphia around the bookstore owned by Moreau de Saint Méry. It is pleasing to see this study look at the American influences adding to the body of material on emigration during the Revolution that is evolving. The larger study of all French émigrés of the Revolution in America during the period, which of course included the future King of France, Louis Philippe, remains to be done.

One of the slightly misleading things about this study is the difference between the title's claim to be about "Liberal French Nobles in Exile" and the more restrained group of former Constituent Assembly members who frequented Moreau de Saint Méry's bookshop that it is really about. To be fair it is hardly representative of liberal French nobles many of whom did not go as far as America, but settled in London, Vienna or in other cities of Europe. Talleyrand himself went first to London and was a frequent visitor at Juniper Hall with Madame de Staël and Narbonne, Jaucourt and d'Arblay (later the husband of Francis Burney) with whom he enjoyed political sympathies. He only departed for America because he was formally asked to leave Britain.

It is also misleading to give the impression that all deputies with patriot political leanings in the period of 1790-91 repaired to America to lick their political wounds. America was a less than desirable destination for the émigrés, and those who went usually did so out of lack of an alternative escape route, as was the case for the family de la Tour du Pin Gouvernet, or they chose America out of dire financial necessity.<sup>[1]</sup> Sometimes it was a combination of both. The same is true of chapter one's title, "Aristocrats and Liberal Nobles on the eve of the Revolution."<sup>[2]</sup> It is highly problematic to classify as liberal nobles all those who did not embrace staunch royalist views or to use these categories as if they are fixed. Far from all the members of the Society of Thirty went into exile, and Harsanyi could have shed more light on the exceptional nature of those who went to America. One of the most important aspects of the evolution of the emigration was the progressive polarisation of political views, and pressure in places like London to adopt purist attitudes towards the Revolution. Chateaubriand is a good example of this pressure to conform to views he did not initially share but, for reasons of peer pressure and social credibility, proceeded to embrace. America as Madame de la Tour du Pin points out, provided asylum from the dreadful prejudice of emigration society for those who were not enamoured of the politics or behaviours of the '*purs*'. Apart from mentioning this, Harsanyi does not go further to explore why more liberal nobles by her own definitions did not seek to go to America.

From chapter two the value of this book begins to shine through but it is hampered still by a lack of clear focus. The spotlight is on Moreau's friends rather than the role in emigration of the bookstore itself. In London two French bookstores Dulau and De Boffe in Soho created a salon society for French émigrés with time on their hands and fulfilled an important social and publishing

function.[3] No background on the bookstore is given as to where the collections came from or who, apart from the very select group, read them. The rest of the chapter is given over to potted biographies of the friends all available in greater depth elsewhere, and the last on Moreau himself still gives no clue about his experience of emigration, his financial means, or of setting himself up in the bookstore.

Chapter three underscores the fact that the French had very little idea of what to expect in America. The French knew about the political organisation and philosophical political derivation of the state since independence from Britain, but little in actual practice of the people other than those like Morris who had been to Paris in 1789 and very little real knowledge of the society. There is a striking absence of any reference to women and children even to the lack of information about them. This in a book written in 2010 is surely an oversight although Harsanyi does explain that these particular individuals did not have wives or families.

At the beginning of chapter four Harsanyi does concede that America was not the first destination for the émigrés, but she only mentions London as if there were no others. There were significant émigré communities in St Petersburg, Moscow, Vienna, in the Germanic states, Switzerland, Italy, Spain and Portugal. Here too she makes one of the most glaring falsehoods of the book when she writes that Madame de Staël “transformed the place (Juniper Hall in 1793) into a salon equal to the most sought-out enlightened salons in Paris.” That is an extremely over-optimistic interpretation of what was an intimate, countrified and comfortable retreat, of extremely modest proportion compared to the life any of the residents had known in Paris prior to exile. But the chapter redeems itself by making the very valid point that apart from the vicomte de Noailles who was curious to see America none of the émigrés planned to set foot there, and would not have done so had it not been for the Revolution. As it was, their *séjour* was intended to last only “as long as circumstances in France prevented their return.” There follows some of the best detail in the book about these émigrés’ experiences of American culture. Harsanyi also shows, perhaps inadvertently, that these so-called ‘liberal’ émigrés were just as prejudiced as those whom Madame de la Tour du Pin was very happy to leave behind in Britain.

Chapter five again throws up the problem of the representative nature of the sample. Subheadings like “The Challenge of Doing Business in America” suggest a wider representation than is actually the case. Despite this, the points made are valid. Few noble émigrés whether of the liberal or royalist variety had any impact on American politics during their stay. They were not encouraged by American government or given encouragement as political reporters as is noted in the case of Noailles’ letter to William Windham. They were politically superfluous in America as in France, and they contented themselves with speculating because unlike the vast majority of émigrés who by 1795 if not earlier had run out of funds, they were still solvent.

Chapter six a very useful chapter showing just what a range of influences in fact fed into Directory politics although the lingering problem of overstating the representative nature remains. This chapter reveals the lessons that had been learned in America, and applies them to the Directory in general terms without considering to what extent these lessons were already applied by the constitutional royalists who had either not ever left France or returned from emigration in other parts of Europe in anticipation of the lifting of the émigré laws at an earlier stage. Again it throws up the irony that émigrés were émigrés from the perspective of the French government and law, and that liberal or royalist made little difference. This was a problem for those who saw their efforts as constructive and their findings of significance—the main lessons first that in politics interest should come before passion, and the second that freedom of religion secured domestic tranquillity are it has to be said rather mundane.

Harsanyi makes very clear that she sees this group as representative of a “forward-looking noble identity continued the ‘patriotic revolution’ that preceded the Revolution, wherein typical noble attributes were integrated into the all-encompassing virtue of patriotism.” This is in keeping with the writing of Munro Price and Philip Mansel who show just how much continuity was involved in the court society before the Revolution and after the Restoration.[4] This conclusion reinforces that position showing that these émigrés “understood exile in America, as an opportunity to make sense

of this unique experience, the better to embark again on a new, and hopefully less traumatic political mission” back in their own country. They wanted to better understand where the Revolution had gone wrong and to reflect without abandoning the gains of the pre-Revolutionary period, upon the principles of 1789 and the first year’s work of the Constituent Assembly’s proceedings.

While I have underscored the problems which are common to much work on the emigration due to the lack of more precise political definitions and social boundaries in the sources, this book makes clear to what extent the political quest of these men was to contribute to the good future government of France. They were aloof in America though they drew their livelihoods from there in the short-term, but in the long-term they were passionate about their futures that they conceived of as being inextricably linked to their country of origin. Doina Pasca Harsanyi has used a range of sources that marry the French and American aspects of the topic well, and produced a book that makes a delightful read and a solid contribution to the emigration experience during the French Revolution.

#### NOTES

[1] See: Caroline Moorhead’s *Dancing to the Precipice, Lucie de la Tour du Pin and the French Revolution*, (Chatto and Windus: London, 2009), chapter nine. Or the original mémoire: La Tour du Pin, marquise de, *Journal d’une femme de cinquante ans 1778-1815*, 2 vols, (Berger-Levrault: Paris, 1920).

[2] See: William Doyle, *Aristocracy and Its Enemies in the Age of Revolution*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)

[3] See: Kirsty Carpenter, *Refugees of the French Revolution, Émigrés in London 1789-1802*, (Macmillan Press Ltd: London, 1999), p. 54

[4] Munro Price, *The Perilous Crown, France between Revolutions 1814-1848*, (Macmillan: London, 2007) and Philip Mansel, *Paris between Empires, 1814-1852*, (John Murray: London, 2001).

Kirsty Carpenter  
Massey University, New Zealand  
K.Carpenter@massey.ac.nz

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.