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Jean-Luc Chappey, *Ordres et désordres biographiques: dictionnaires, listes de noms, réputation des Lumières à Wikipédia*. Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2013. 399 pp. €27.00. ISBN 978-2-87673-600-9.

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How were representations of the social and political world constructed and circulated in France between 1750 and 1830, a period of widespread upheaval and change? As initially posed in Jean-Luc Chappey's book, the question his study aims to investigate is unworkably huge. The shift from *ancien régime* to Empire was a complex, multi-faceted event, one that has been understood according to numerous interpretive paradigms and models. A comprehensive critical history of French historiography could be written—or written anew—by considering how historians during the last two centuries have grappled precisely with the question of this event. Jean-Luc Chappey makes his own contribution to this interpretive debate, and with it to a more general understanding of historiographical practice, by considering the period in question from the more tightly-focused interpretive perspective of the historical dictionary and, in particular, the kind of life-writing illustrated by the biographical notice.

Three types of dictionaries constitute the object of this study: the encyclopedic dictionary of the arts and sciences (exemplified most notably by Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, whose first volume appeared in 1751); the dictionary of the French language (such as that of the Académie Française, the volumes of whose first edition began appearing in 1694); and the historical dictionary (such as Louis Moréri's *Grand dictionnaire ou mélange curieux de l'histoire sacrée et profane* of 1674 or Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique* of 1697). All three types of dictionaries contain biographical notices alphabetically arranged, notices that resemble the canonical genre of the eulogy exemplified by the *éloge de réception* of the Académie Française or the more religious *oraison funèbre*, such as those of Jacques Bénigne Bossuet. These ways of phrasing a life in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries themselves stem from a long-standing tradition of life-writing, an early example of which is Plutarch's late first-century *Lives of Noble Greeks and Romans*. The heyday of this genre of life-writing is the period covered by Chappey's study, a period marked by the intense "dictionarization" of knowledge.

Chappey's concern is not to determine anew the broad social and political changes taking place in France during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Thus, he makes no claims to trace some process of identity construction involving class, rank, institution, profession or commerce. Nor is he interested in revealing the emergence of an early modern classificatory thinking in these dictionaries, or in taking their biographical notices as reflecting the construction of France's national, monarchical, revolutionary or imperial Pantheon. Chappey does not reject these concerns, however, for he relies on certain explanatory narratives that undergird them, all the while breaking with others. He explicitly rejects, for example, the theoretical premise of a certain book history and intellectual history that reduces books to receptacles of ideas, concepts, and theories that are somehow constructed "outside" these books. His historiographical approach involves revealing the complex discursive mechanisms that made the events of the period legible to individuals at the time. The historical dictionaries analyzed here, he argues, played a major role in constructing those categories of reading that shaped historical subjects' interpretation of the world. One of the major forms of historical writing in the eighteenth

century, these historical dictionaries, and in particular their biographical notices, represented a powerful and wide-ranging way of ordering political, social, and cultural space.

To understand why these historical dictionaries represented one of the major forms of historical writing in eighteenth-century France, Chappey argues that we must reassess how they are to be read. All too often these essential tools of the historian are used uncritically. They are taken as valuable repositories of information, yet little attention is given to the question of how they should be read, or to the conditions of their production, publication, distribution, and reception. In making uncritical use of these dictionaries, the historian falls victim to their rhetorical situation, for these texts are shaped by “[de] nombreuses stratégies narratives consistant à masquer le contexte de leur production, les modalités de leur rédaction, voire la position et les intérêts de leurs auteurs” (p. 9). The historical dictionary provides historical knowledge, but it is situated, not neutral, knowledge, designed to make shifting social and political spaces legible.

In the book’s first chapter, “Une invention du XIX^e siècle: la *Biographie universelle* des frères Michaud,” Chappey reveals the broad impact a biographical dictionary could have through his analysis of the Michaud brothers’ *Biographie universelle*, fifty-two volumes of which were published between 1811 and 1814, and which by the 1828 edition involved 336 collaborators. The writing of biographical entries “constitue un moyen essentiel pour imposer une lecture particulière sur un événement, un champ de savoir ou un domaine de compétence” (p. 73). The reading the *Biographie* sought to impose aimed to create a stable vision of history, to reestablish the Empire’s new continuity with the distant past while effacing the memory of an all too near revolutionary past. Entries in the *Biographie* created and legitimated new fields of knowledge with their own authorities, dominant institutions, consecrated theories, and interpretive tools, just as they worked to push other ways of knowing into the background. Examples include the praise of the “scientific” Cuvier, the denunciation of a “non-scientific” Mesmer, the construction of the “romantic” Galileo, and the presentation of Paris as the political and cultural capital of civilization, the standard-setter for universal scientific validity.

Notices of *femmes célèbres* affirmed a new, “natural” female identity. These notices also caused Mme de Genlis to break with the project to write her own *De l’influence des femmes*. A thoroughly collective project, the *Biographie* claimed precisely for that reason to be able to guarantee neutrality, impartiality, and scientific validity, a stance that was in line, conveniently enough, with the regime’s desire to reconcile factions and put the debates of the Directory and the Consulate behind it.

A second chapter, “Dictionnaires au temps des Lumières: critique et opinion publique,” considers the eighteenth-century “origins” of the historical dictionary. The main precursor was Moréri’s dictionary, which provided an exhaustive catalog of great men whose lives were presented as models of action and virtue. Numerous “Lives,” “Portraits,” and “Galleries” had been published in the seventeenth century, and already in the sixteenth century, the corpus of biographies had expanded to include members of the world of arts and letters, not just the “great” (kings, emperors, and saints). An ever-increasing number of individuals seemed to have the right to a life. As Chappey stresses, the hierarchical order that implicitly gave meaning to these lives came to be questioned, its legitimacy no longer a natural given in the face of new forms of legitimacy based on the value of civic service to the common good. The historical dictionary promoted new forms of social existence. An entry in Moréri was a way to promote one’s family in the power struggles and rivalries that traversed the world of the nobility. In the Republic of Letters, the historical dictionary determined the man of letters on the way to becoming an “author,” differentiating him from the erudite antiquarian and judging his contribution to civic life based on his works. These eighteenth-century historical dictionaries reflected a shift from the fragmented collection of “lives” to a more synthetic history, a shift from repetitive, exemplary history (*historia magistra*) to history coming to be conceived as process.

A third chapter, “Désordres biographique et crise politique,” investigates the role that historical dictionaries played, along with theater audiences and salons, in constructing categories of judgment that would serve to found a new tribunal of opinion in the eighteenth century. Destabilizing traditional forms of recognition and identity, shaping new reputations and hierarchies in the place of former ones that were perceived to be increasingly dysfunctional, the biographical component of these dictionaries served to help create a “name.” With differing sets of criteria for judgment in play, these historical dictionaries also testified to deep conflicts in the Republic of Letters over which categories of interpretation should serve as the basis on which to interpret the current social and political crisis.

In “Jeux de noms en Révolution (1789-1794),” Chappey analyzes the essential role played by biography in the politicization of citizens during the Revolutionary period. Historical dictionaries of the time staged the self in new ways, constructing—or destroying—the reputation of political actors and reflecting the struggle for control of the codes and norms for writing a life. The “degree zero” of life-writing, the list, such as the “*Liste des bons patriotes composant le club des Jacobins*,” was a way not merely to inform readers, but to give meaning to the political event by creating a new political imagery, one around which citizens were called to unite. In Revolutionary list-writing, “new” men are invoked in order to erase the men of the past, as if the only heroes possible could be those of the present, figured in a paper Pantheon, where power and life combine in a “biocracy.” Chappey explores this combination in a fifth chapter, “L’Émergence d’une biocratie (1795-1810).” During this period, the biographical was put to multiple uses, constructing the imagery of the Terror through the generation of martyrologies and bolstering the legitimacy of the republican regime, in part by capturing the legacy of a progressive, civilizing Enlightenment represented by the figure of the *savant*. Generals as well orchestrated their own self-promotion through the figure of the military man and the narrative of military exploits. The biographical also contributed to the recomposition of an honorable *noblesse d’État*, even as life-writing during the period radicalized oppositions and made political pacification increasingly less possible.

A sixth chapter, “Batailles de dictionnaires sous l’Empire et la Restauration,” explores a new, post-Revolutionary *régime d’historicité* reflected in and produced by historical dictionaries. A breeding ground for life stories, these dictionaries were used by journalists, novelists, and authors of memoirs, as well as judges and doctors in crafting a new notoriety. These historical dictionaries created heightened visibility for groups such as the medical community, veterans, and women. Setting the goal of collecting materials for future historians, they joined other ways of affirming and reclaiming the self in the period around 1820, such as the novel and autobiography. They offered new scenographies of authorship and new configurations of a kaleidoscopic self that constituted models for negotiating the relation between the individual and a new social order.

In a final chapter, “Dicomania et Wikipédia,” Chappey telescopes the time frame of his study to the recent past, suggesting a trajectory in which the historical dictionary, and especially the individual biography of “great” individuals, lost its central position in political and intellectual dynamics. The early nineteenth-century *Biographie universelle* morphed into the French *Who’s Who* of 1953, and what in 1998 the journal *Critique* called “dicomania” marks the attempt to recompose a totalizing history. The explosion of dictionaries in all manner of disciplines reflects editorial ventures that mark what François Dosse, among others, diagnosed as a “histoire en miettes.”^[1] Chappey takes the measure of history’s current disciplinary situation through his analysis of the contemporary version of the biographical entry that is found in Wikipedia. He takes Wikipedia to represent, among other things, a new space for the production and diffusion of historical knowledge, judged alternatively to illustrate popular history, counter-history, even anti-history, Chappey offers a fine-grained analysis of the Wikipedia portal on the French Revolution. In contributors’ fervent debates there over the criteria that should dictate the writing of certain biographical entries, Chappey provides a telling investigation of the disciplinary production of history in the present moment.

While Jean-Luc Chappey's study makes no sweeping claims for a new grand narrative that would explain French history of the past two centuries, it does offer a richly researched, cogently argued, and highly suggestive examination of the importance of bio-narratives in generating historical understanding. The familiar tool of the historian, the historical dictionary, is cast in a new light here, linked to deep-seated social, political, and cultural transformations, by which it is shaped and which it in turn makes legible. Chappey analyzes this form of life-writing not in terms of trans-historical self-expression, nor as an ahistorical literary genre. Rather, he demonstrates how, by examining the role historical dictionaries played in the social and political dynamics of the past, we can better understand the media-saturated regime of the present, a regime, he claims, that in the name of defending "identities" ultimately works to naturalize appearances, petrify individual histories, and defend traditional forms of domination.

NOTE

[1] François Dosse, *L'Histoire en miettes: des Annales à la nouvelle histoire* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 1987).

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