
H-France Review Vol. 14 (May 2014), No. 72

David Address, ed., *Experiencing the French Revolution*. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2013. *SVEC* 2013:05. viii + 332 pp. \$106.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN: 9780729410663 0729410668.

Review by Ronald Schechter, The College of William and Mary.

In this volume David Address has brought together twelve able scholars, some junior and others senior, to explore a wide range of subjects relating to the French Revolution. What they all have in common is some attention to “experience.” In the editor’s view, historians have vainly sought a paradigm that would make sense of how people experienced the Revolution. Address critiques Lynn Hunt’s use of neuroscience, which he believes can tell us little “about historical actors that they did not understand themselves” (p. 4). He faults Daniel Wickberg’s call for a “history of sensibilities” since the term “sensibility” in his view is too capacious to mean anything (p. 5). He believes William Reddy’s theory of “emotives” proposes “the dubious notion that emotions only become valid objects of analysis when we can catch people saying that they have them” (p. 6). The “emotionology” of Peter and Carol Stearns timidly limits itself to a study of “what societies collectively do with the idea of emotions, not how individuals actually experience them” (p. 7).^[1]

Rather than simply lament the absence of a satisfying paradigm to explain revolutionary experience, however, Address argues that it is wrong to search for one. This is not merely an epistemological issue in which the imposition of a model precludes our ability to see the evidence of actual experience, but, the editor suggests, an ethical one as well. Address writes, in response to the question of what constituted experience, “We move away from the urge to pin an external label on how people behaved, preferring to explore the possibility that they and we may only ever have differing understandings of their circumstances, and that prioritising our classificatory urges over their reflections and representations would be an ethical error” (pp. 9-10). This raises the stakes considerably, as it “explore[s] the possibility” that the historians Address disagrees with have not simply failed to get at “experience” but rather given in to unethical “urges.” I will return to this matter below, but first I would like to discuss the fine essays the contributors have written.

In the first chapter, a model of digital humanities scholarship, Simon Burrows uses the archives of the Société typographique de Neuchâtel (STN) to revise some of the findings of Robert Darnton, who based much of his study of the book trade on that repository. With the aid of a team of researchers under his direction at the University of Leeds, Burrows compiled a database “of the entire international book trade” of the STN (p. 19), and after crunching the numbers concluded that although Darnton was right about the considerable French appetite for pornography in the decades leading up to the French Revolution, he underestimated the demand for serious philosophical works, which were even more popular than erotic works. Moreover, Burrows has determined that measures taken by the French monarchy in 1783 were highly successful in curtailing the illegal book trade. “This clampdown,” he argues, “gives us a new insight into why the revolutionaries embraced freedom of expression with such enthusiasm” (p. 38).

Next, Charles Walton addresses the matter of patriotic contributions. He argues that “the impulse to give [patriotic gifts] grew out of the experience of the revolution.” Specifically, it was “a response to the

terror of seeing the world turned upside down by unprecedented political audacity and unpredictable violence.” Walton adds, “Givers sought to re-establish trust in society” (p. 48). He acknowledges that people who made patriotic contributions often had ulterior motives (thus, some of the people who relinquished their privileges in the summer of 1789 knew that they were going to lose them anyway and wanted to look generous), and that many “gifts” were actually coerced, especially during the Terror, but he believes that we miss the point of revolutionary giving if we assume that it was primarily based on cynical motives. Yet, he does not go to the other extreme of idealizing such activity. In the end, he believes, giving was a pragmatic response to fear. He writes, “For those experiencing economic upheaval, political collapse, chronic violence, food shortages and foreign invasion, expressions of unity through generosity were pragmatic precisely *for being reassuring...*” (p. 66). Not everyone will be convinced, if only because motivations are notoriously difficult to uncover, but Walton makes his thought-provoking case skillfully.

In the following chapter, Peter McPhee seeks to rehabilitate Robespierre, the revolutionary leader whose readiness to accept violence in the service of political goals has led historians and others to list him among history’s most bloodthirsty tyrants. McPhee argues that Robespierre’s relationship to violence was more complicated. Prior to 1789 Robespierre was against the death penalty, but with the Revolution he came to accept popular violence (such as the killings of royal officials shortly following the storming of the Bastille) as “regrettable but understandable” (p. 71). In response to other acts of collective violence, he “...continued to argue similarly, that collective violence against the remnants of the *ancien régime* was legitimate while the Assembly hesitated to act firmly” (p. 74). He changed his tune once he was in power, beginning in the Fall of 1793, and argued (self-servingly, one might suspect) that popular violence was no longer necessary or legitimate, since the revolutionary government had things under control. McPhee also makes much of the fact that Robespierre “never seems to have lost his personal squeamishness about physical suffering; indeed, he avoided it repeatedly.” He adds, “It is unlikely that he witnessed the handful of public killings immediately after the Bastille fell or the far greater retribution meted out to many hundreds of Swiss Guards after August 10, 1792 or to priests, nobles and common criminals early the following month, even though he was close by. He never left Paris to visit the killing grounds on the frontiers or in the Vendée. There is no evidence that he ever attended a guillotining” (p. 83). In other words, he sent people to their death and advocated or justified the killing of many others, but he didn’t watch. This sets up an arguably low standard for humanitarianism. Nevertheless, it tells us something about Robespierre’s experience of the Revolution.

In the next chapter we learn about Robespierre’s nemesis, Jean-Lambert Tallien. Mette Harder has reconstructed the career of this political opportunist who was complicit in the September Massacres but shielded his aristocratic friends from the Terror, who befriended Danton but then stood in silence when he went to the scaffold, who launched a pre-emptive attack against his erstwhile ally Robespierre and then held him personally responsible for the Terror, thereby effacing Tallien’s own role as a *terroriste*. He enjoyed immense (though brief) popularity as a tyrannicide, maintained connections with royalists but “pushed for the execution of 752 royalists” (p. 104) who had supported a failed landing of émigrés at Quiberon Bay in 1795, went to Egypt with Napoleon as a flatterer-journalist (editing *La Décade égyptienne*), and worked for the Consulate and Empire in minor diplomatic posts but only found the courage to oppose Napoleon openly “[t]owards the end of the Empire” (p. 109) when the political winds had shifted against the Emperor. Tallien even managed to negotiate the right to remain in France during the Bourbon Restoration, when other regicides were exiled. Historians should pay attention to Tallien, Harder argues, because “his career represents a side of the Convention that is not well known: that of its members as conflicted *bon [sic] vivants* who tried to find a balance between their republican principles and personal lives” (p. 111). Whether Tallien had any principles is still unclear, but the point is well taken: an understanding of the Revolution depends on a willingness to look at distasteful figures who preferred power, connections and comfort to the principles they proclaimed.

Next Ian Germani explores “the experience of military justice” during the Revolution. Though he shows that soldiers were severely punished on occasion, he argues persuasively that the story was more complicated. Often soldiers were acquitted, especially if they were stealing from local populations (or from each other) in order to survive, and those responsible for military justice (whether army commanders or civilian *représentants en mission*) generally balanced a belief in the utility of exemplary justice with a “sense of ‘measure’” (p. 133) and a recognition of the rights of the accused. Germani acknowledges the “excesses and inconsistencies of military justice during the Revolution” but writes, “Before we judge them too severely, we should keep in mind that those who served on the various courts and tribunals of the Revolution had to respond to these influences not in the calm, reflective environment of learned academies and law schools, but quite literally on the front lines, in the midst of crisis, invasion and civil war” (p. 133).

Alex Fairfax-Cholmeley’s chapter aims at revising our understanding of the “victim” of the Terror. Historians often reduce this category to people killed by order of the Revolutionary Tribunals, the author notes, which “obviates the need to research and write about the activity of those threatened, denounced, imprisoned or put on trial” (p. 140). In order to rectify this bias, Fairfax-Cholmeley has analyzed seventy-three printed defenses from a collection in the *Archives nationales* catalogued under the title “Dénonciations et pamphlets, 1788-1815.” These publications sought to defend people who had been denounced during the Terror, whether they were on trial, in prison or free (but presumably at risk of being arrested). The existence and content of the publications raise interesting questions about the Terror. To begin with, they show the strength of print culture during a period when historians would have us believe freedom of the press had been crushed. Perhaps more interestingly, their content shows us historical agents who cannot be reduced to passive victimhood, citizens who defended themselves, launched counter-accusations against their accusers, and drew on the resources of family and friends to exonerate themselves and restore their reputations. “Taken together, print denunciations and print defences point to a vibrant print culture which stands at odds with the traditional image of a period shorn of dissent and debate” (p. 153).

The following chapter, by Jonathan Smyth, examines the experience of participants in the Festival of the Supreme Being. Smyth departs from the view that the Festival was simply imposed on the population without inspiring any genuine enthusiasm. His evidence is that unlike the many stereotypical letters to the Convention proclaiming loyalty to the Republic and lauding its leaders, the correspondence revolving around the Festival, from municipal authorities throughout France to the Committee of Public Instruction, “included responses directly from the public in the form of hymns, and prayers addressed to the Supreme Being and poems and speeches for declamation during the local festivals” (p. 157). A skeptical reader of the materials Smyth presents would no doubt counter that flatterers often take the initiative, but Smyth’s interpretation at least reminds us to consider the possibility that sometimes people meant what they said (or wrote), even when addressing the revolutionary leaders during the Terror.

Ronen Steinberg’s chapter argues against an anachronistic view of the Terror as producing “trauma,” as this concept only first appeared in the 1860s to account for the effects of railway accidents and “really gained ground” (p. 179) after World War I, when an explanation of “shell shock” was necessary. Steinberg takes us back to the immediate aftermath of the Terror and finds that not all commentators viewed the effects of terror in negative terms. Medical theories of the time sometimes attributed positive, healthful effects to terror, and Steinberg argues that writings invoking them had political implications, since (as Antoine de Baecque and Dorinda Outram have shown) society was typically understood to be an organism. Thus “...the effects of the Terror were contradictory, simultaneously therapeutic and pathological, constructive and destructive” (p. 192).^[2] Moreover, Steinberg finds that political commentators, drawing on the writings of Hobbes, Montesquieu and Burke, explained the Terror in the French Revolution as merely an extreme instance of the violence at the heart of all political systems. Of course, this tells us more about theories of revolutionary experience than about

that experience itself. Indeed, Steinberg explicitly repudiates the notion that historians have access to an “incommunicable core of experience,” and claims more skeptically, “What historians can do is to reconstruct the conceptual frameworks and cultural codes that make it possible for individuals to make sense of their experiences and to make them understandable to others.” (p. 197)

Next, Marisa Linton offers a contribution to the growing literature on the emotions, and particularly on fear, in the Revolution. She focuses on “the impact of fear on the Jacobin leaders themselves,” noting that they were “beset by fears,” and arguing that their “anxieties and insecurities, fed by suspicions of counter-revolutionary conspiracies, contributed to an escalation of tension at the political centre, and thus affected decision-making in the critical period from the autumn of 1793 to the summer of 1794” (p. 202). Linton acknowledges that it is hard to find evidence of Jacobins feeling fear, since the republican rhetoric they were obliged to use emphasized virtue, selflessness and a willingness to die for the *patrie*, but their repeated references of the danger of assassination, combined with the reality of attempted and successful assassinations, make it hard to believe that they were not afraid. Moreover, their fear led them to lash out against both real and imagined adversaries. Thus, they sent fifty-four people to the guillotine for their supposed role in the attempt on Robespierre’s life on 5 Prairial (May 24, 1794).

Linton’s essay is followed by a chapter by Brecht Deseure on the uses of “historical discourse” in the French occupation of Belgium. Deseure argues that the French did not, as historians have long assumed, fail to pay attention to the “local sensibilities” of the Belgians whose territory they occupied (p. 222). Nor did they content themselves with promoting abstract principles when seeking to indoctrinate their new compatriots. Rather, they paid close attention to Belgian history, using it to make the case for the revolutionary “liberators.” Revolutionary officials reminded the Belgians of their ancient ancestors’ love of liberty and their more recent ancestors’ heroic revolt against Philip II of Spain. Likewise, the administrator in charge of Antwerp invoked history when recalling the commercial glory the city had enjoyed in the sixteenth century before the closing of the Scheldt River to navigation. (The French reopened the Scheldt and thereby promised a return to prosperity.) This chapter successfully argues that “[m]ore attention clearly needs to be given to the appropriation of history in revolutionary discourse both before and after Thermidor,” (p. 242) but it is hard to say how the study reconstructs revolutionary “experience.”

Next, Ffion Jones examines the impact of a failed French landing in Pembrokeshire in southwest Wales on Nonconformists who were accused of collaboration with the revolutionary invaders. Taking advantage of her proficiency in Welsh, she uses neglected sources, particularly published ballads, to reconstruct the complicated story of Methodists and Dissenters, some of whom had Radical sympathies and supported the Revolution in 1793 but by 1797 saw it as a reactionary and aggressive force.

Finally, J. Ward Regan’s chapter, “Thomas Paine: Life during Wartime,” surveys the works of the famous revolutionary writer. It goes over familiar ground, but it argues that Paine is best understood in terms of his experiences. Thus, for example, his passion for equality and social justice came not from abstract principles but from his own experience as an artisan of modest origins. Moreover, his revolutionary writings grew out of his experience fighting alongside Washington, attempting to save Louis XVI from the wrath of the most radical Jacobins, spending time in prison for his pains and barely escaping death, and avoiding the wrath of the British authorities who considered him a traitor. Regan also takes issue with the common categorization of Paine as a political philosopher and prefers to classify him “as the template for the modern transnational independent journalist-radical” (p. 263).

Each of the chapters is worth reading in its own right, and students of the French Revolution will learn much from these original and well-researched contributions. How well they cohere isn’t entirely clear. The theme that brings them together is experience, a somewhat open-ended concept, but not all of the chapters obviously highlight experience. For example, Burrows’ study is outstanding, but it isn’t clear that it focuses on experience. It tells us a lot about the tastes of the pre-revolutionary reading public, but

I'm not sure that tastes are a subset of "experience." The successful suppression of illegal books in 1783 "better explains popular reveling in the ready availability of political works, pamphlets and newsprint" during the Revolution (p. 38), and reveling is certainly an experience, but the article doesn't focus on that activity. Deseure's study of "French political legitimation and historical discourse in Belgium (1792-1799)" is excellent, but as the title itself indicates, it is about discourse. Steinberg's fascinating chapter on trauma is really about conceptions of trauma. In other words, it is intellectual history. Furthermore, drawing on philosopher Thomas Nagel's essay, "What is it Like to be a Bat?" Steinberg explicitly questions the degree to which any of us can have access to another's experience (p. 197n).

The articles that most unmistakably deal with experience are those that recount the lives of revolutionary leaders. Thus, we learn from McPhee about Robespierre's squeamishness, from Harder about Tallien's defensiveness over his humble origins, and from Linton about the fears suffered by Jacobin leaders. Is this because the focus on the "reflections and representations" of people who lived at the time of the Revolution privileges the study of "great men"? Certainly people like Robespierre, Tallien and Paine are more likely to have left us this material than less powerful members of French society. At the same time, it is noticeable that in a volume containing twelve chapters, none of them deal with the experience of women.

Andress acknowledges "the notable focus of this present volume on certain groups of European men and their experiences" and rather defensively assumes that this focus "would not fit with the kind of history many other historians would like to see written" (p. 15). Yet, rather than explaining this focus he simply invokes the freedom of "a pluralist academic culture," adding, "There is an infinite variety of historical gardens, and in the absence of overt ideological coercion (which despite the fears of some has yet to come to pass in Anglophone academia), we should not be afraid or ashamed of the choices we make in each cultivating our own. (p. 15).

All this brings us back to the question of ethics. Andress has recourse to pluralism when defending himself from unnamed adversaries, evidently feminists and multiculturalists, who would presumably muzzle him if given the chance. But when it comes to historians who use paradigms, whom he rather unkindly calls "paradigm-mongering authors" (p. 15), he does not seem so sure about the legitimacy of their "historical gardens." He "explore[s] the possibility" that the historians in question have given into an unethical "urge," yet he never explains what makes this an urge (as opposed to a style of analysis) or why he thinks positing paradigms is ethically wrong (as opposed to being a mistake). This leads the reader to guess at his reasoning. Do we owe it to the people we study to "prioritize" their "reflections and representations," and if so, what is the basis of this obligation? And do we owe the same debt to Robespierre, for example, to whom many people listened during his lifetime and afterwards, that we would to people who had been silenced (or worse) while he was in power?

For what it's worth, I agree with Andress that historians should be free "to cultivate" their "historical gardens," but this should leave room for more empirically-minded historians as well as scholars with paradigms to offer. Indeed, historical study depends on both groups. Paradigmatic statements without empirical evidence will remain overly speculative, and empirical studies that eschew all paradigms will be of limited interest. Despite my questions and criticisms, I admire Andress's achievement. Editing a volume is hard work that often goes unappreciated, and all the contributors deserve recognition for their excellent scholarship. Together the authors have provided an important contribution to the study of the French Revolution.

LIST OF ESSAYS

David Andress, "Introduction: Revolutionary historiography, adrift or at large? The paradigmatic quest versus the exploration of experience"

I. Experiencing Revolutionary transitions

Simon Burrows, "French banned books in international perspective, 1770-1789"

Charles Walton, "Between trust and terror: patriotic giving in Revolutionary France"

Peter McPhee, "Robespierre and violence"

Mette Harder, "Reacting to revolution—the political career(s) of J.-L. Tallien"

Ian Germani, "'The most striking and the most terrible examples': the experience of military justice in the armies of the French Revolution"

II. Experiences at the heart of the Terror

Alex Fairfax-Cholmeley, "Defence, collaboration, counter-attack: the role and exploitation of the printed word by victims of the Terror, 1793-1794"

Jonathan Smyth, "Public experience of the Revolution: the national reaction to the proclamation of the Fête de l'Être Suprême"

Ronen Steinberg, "Trauma before trauma: imagining the effects of the Terror in the Revolutionary era"

Marisa Linton, "The stuff of nightmares: plots, assassinations and duplicity in the mental world of the Jacobin leaders, 1793-1794"

III. Revolutionary experiences beyond France

Brecht Deseure, "'Rappelez-leur, pour mieux les persuader': French political legitimization and historical discourse in Belgium (1792-1799)"

Ffion Jones, "'The silly expressions of French revolution...': the experience of the Dissenting community in south-west Wales, 1797"

J. Ward Regan, "Thomas Paine: life during wartime"

NOTES

[1] Lynn Hunt, "The Experience of the French Revolution," *French Historical Studies* 32 (Fall 2009): 671-78; Daniel Wickberg, "What is the History of Sensibilities? On Cultural Histories, Old and New," *American Historical Review* 112 (June 2007): 661-84; William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Peter N. Stearns and Carol Z. Stearns, "Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards," *American Historical Review* 90 (October 1985): 813-36.

[2] Antoine de Baecque, *The Body Politic: Corporeal Metaphor in Revolutionary France, 1770-1800* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 314; and Dorinda Outram, *The Body and the French Revolution: Sex, Class, and Political Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 50-51.

Ronald Schechter
The College of William and Mary
rbsche@wm.edu

Copyright © 2013 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