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David A. Bell, *Shadows of Revolution: Reflections on France, Past and Present*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. Xii + 444 pp. Illustrations and Index. \$29.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-19-026268-6.

Review by Lloyd Kramer, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

David Bell has been an influential contributor to recent scholarship on the history of old regime French lawyers, the emergence of French nationalism, the development of Napoleonic-era “total war,” and the meaning of Napoleon’s life and actions.[1] This important work has established his reputation for careful research and for insightful, analytical overviews of major historical issues. This new book, however, offers a very different kind of historical writing. *Shadows of Revolution: Reflections on France, Past and Present* consists almost entirely of book reviews and historical commentaries that he has written for nonacademic magazines and newspapers over the last twenty-five years.

This collection thus sets aside the usual infrastructure of historical scholarship (there are no footnotes, bibliography, or archival sources), yet it conveys a remarkable range of historical knowledge. Dispensing with the footnoted research of academic writing, Bell describes his fascination with France, his critical-minded engagement with complex cultural issues, and his belief that modern French history remains an important subject for readers who live in other nations and also live happily without ever reading historical scholarship.

“Public intellectual” is the common, amorphous term for authors who write regularly for public audiences. Bell does not explicitly claim this identity for himself, but he definitely wants to explain to nonacademic readers why academic research has cultural significance far beyond university seminar rooms. His diverse reviews and commentaries therefore reiterate an overarching theme that might be briefly stated in this general claim: *the history of France provides essential knowledge and exemplary events that can help people everywhere better understand the development of modern political conflicts, social movements, literary cultures, nationalist identities, ethnic scapegoating, and personal moral choices.*

His book lacks the narrative coherence of historical monographs and popular biographies (the “overarching theme” is my own broad takeaway from his wide-ranging chapters), but Bell gives non-specialist readers accessible introductions to the debates that make French historical studies such a vibrant arena for the exchange of political and cultural ideas. In most general terms, Bell argues that people inside and outside France live in the “shadows” of its revolutionary, always-conflicted history. You may not want to know much about France, Bell seems to be telling his English-language readers, but you will learn a lot about yourself and your own society if you examine the complex legacies of modern French history. Amid the contemporary tidal wave of technical and business-oriented education, Bell’s insistence on the significance of French historical studies reaffirms the enduring currents of humanistic knowledge and analysis.

*Shadows of Revolution* begins with an autobiographical account of how Bell developed his early scholarly interests in French history as a visiting student at the École Normale Supérieure in 1983-84. Immersing himself in Parisian life and in that era's debates about both the French Revolution and the Vichy-era counterrevolution, Bell "started to feel a powerful new connection to the French past" (p. 2), and he came to recognize that "billions of people... since 1789, including many who never even heard of the French Revolution, have lived under its shadow" (p. 7). He learned also (sometimes from startling personal encounters) about a disturbing French anti-Semitism that long opposed the universalizing "rights of man" and deeply influenced the collaborationist Vichy regime during World War II, a depressing historical reality that he has continued to study "obsessively" since the 1980s (p. 8). Like many American historians of France, Bell drew on his personal French experiences to embark on an academic career, but unlike most American historians of France he has drawn on his expanding scholarly knowledge to write about French history for non-scholarly audiences.

The first six sections of his book move from reviews of *longue-durée* accounts of French identities and national memories into discussions of more chronologically focused works on Enlightenment-era philosophes, revolutionary leaders, Napoleonic wars, nineteenth-century cultural changes, and Vichy support for Nazi-organized genocide. Bell approaches these eras and events somewhat indirectly through a distinctive book reviewing method that introduces nonacademic readers to the changing themes of contemporary historical scholarship. He reviews 46 different books in this collection and also refers to many other recent interpretations of French history. The reviews were first published mostly in *The New Republic* or the *London Review of Books*, but some appeared originally in other publications such as *The Nation*, *The New York Times Sunday Book Review*, and *The New York Review of Books*.

Although Bell analyzes specific books and historical issues, he often notes how particular scholarly works grow out of important innovations in linguistic analysis, cultural anthropology, social history or military studies. Finally, after almost 350 pages of book reviews, he concludes with a section of six essays entitled simply "Parallels: Past and Present." These last chapters compare the history of earlier French conflicts with recent global events, including perestroika in the Soviet Union, revolutionary upheavals in the Middle East, and contemporary anxieties about immigration and terrorism. Breaking away from the format of earlier book reviews, the concluding chapters offer provocative, transnational historical analysis and speculations.

The main analytical themes in *Shadows of Revolution*, however, emerge through the book reviews, and raise an important question. What are the scholarly and cultural reasons to write book reviews? This general question applies also to the paragraphs you are now reading, which are mainly reviewing another author's book reviews. I therefore want to stress why book reviews matter for both academic scholarship and public intellectual life. Good reviews exemplify the dialogical processes that construct all personal intellectual identities as well as the collective work of scholarly communities. Without book reviews, scholarship would lose many of the public exchanges and critical dialogues that lead to new historical knowledge. Professional training should thus give more attention to helping future historians learn how to write good book reviews, in part because book reviews are not just for other scholars. Well-informed, thoughtful book reviews become valuable intellectual bridges that connect academic research with wider public audiences. Good reviews, in short, offer essential cultural services for all kinds of imaginative scholarly work.

Book reviewers might be compared to those well-informed guides you meet at museums and historic monuments. The best guides explain the significance of what you are seeing and place unfamiliar objects within more familiar cultural contexts. Experienced guides are also talented translators and interpreters. They speak an accessible language, tell good stories, and explain why specific paintings and monuments may be flawed or controversial; and they try to imagine how alien cultural traditions or artifacts may baffle visitors from foreign lands.

Bell thus writes book reviews like good tour guides introduce visitors to unfamiliar national museums. He explains and interprets historical scholarship for readers who arrive from non-scholarly cultures and encounter previously unknown objects (complex historical books). He wants to translate unfamiliar academic languages into clear English. Yet Bell also goes beyond the typical tour guide because he often organizes his reviews like salon-style conversations about questions that defy simple answers. “Can we really say that human rights were ‘invented’ in any single time and place?” he writes in a positive review of Lynn Hunt’s book on the history of human rights (p. 141). Similarly, his description of Sophia Rosenfeld’s excellent work on eighteenth-century French linguistic theories leads him to ask in his typical salon-table style: “But is Rosenfeld correct? Has she really demonstrated the connection between epistemological change and political change?” (p. 169)[2] Such questions reappear throughout Bell’s reviews and invite readers into conversations that could last for hours over glasses of fine French wines.

But *what* (to pose my own salon-style question) do both good tour guides and *salonnières* have in common? They want you to share their passion for a favorite object or subject, encouraging you to enter and think about unfamiliar places, and they lead you into new conversations. Historical knowledge also depends on open-ended conversations, which suggests why book reviews, like cross-cultural travel and salon conversations, are essential for vibrant, dialogical, intellectual cultures. Nobody can read most of the books that are published within even a single cultural field, so we all need good intellectual tour guides to help us move into both old and new intellectual communities. Neither scholarship nor public intellectual life can flourish and evolve without thoughtful, knowledgeable reviews of new books.

Despite their cultural importance, book reviews and nonacademic articles are rarely recognized in the reigning system of academic promotion and rewards. Bell’s commitment to book reviewing in magazines and newspapers thus shows a commendable willingness to take professional risks while he was facing the usual expectations and daily tasks of an academic career that has carried him to a distinguished professorship at Princeton University. Even more important for his colleagues, however, he has helped other historians by interpreting their work for public audiences.

Bell writes mostly about books that focus on people rather than on social and economic structures, perhaps because human lives and stories are more interesting to most readers than the history of complex institutions and industrial production. *Shadows of Revolution* thus discusses lots of famous men who have influenced French culture and society from the eighteenth century to the present. Famous women receive far less attention, and the whole field of gender history could give Bell many new books and themes for future reviews.[3] Books on lesser known figures also attract Bell’s interest when they can be linked to major issues in French history. Readers learn, for example, about Esprit Calvet, an eighteenth-century doctor who helped to build a provincial network of participants in the “republic of letters.” There are also excellent discussions of human ethical choices in chapters on Louis Darquier, the evil, anti-Semitic official who ran the Vichy government’s General Commission for Jewish Affairs, and Jean Guéhenno, the writer who quietly resisted the Nazi occupation of Paris in his “enthraling” wartime diary about independent-minded French authors.[4] Such subjects humanize the broad, abstract issues of French history, and they provide specific frameworks in which to praise and criticize different approaches to historical writing.

Bell’s reviews are usually judicious and balanced, but there are recurring critiques of the flaws he finds in weak or problematic books. When Bell writes about “popular,” less academic work, he often criticizes the one-dimensional analysis or the ignorance of recent scholarship or the lack of archival sources. He describes David McCullough’s widely read book on Americans in nineteenth-century Paris, for example, as “disappointingly superficial” and indifferent to “the standard scholarly studies of nineteenth-century Paris” in both English and French (pp. 285-86). Similarly, he calls Graham Robb’s popular book about rural France “a distressingly bad book” that ignores most recent scholarship on French social life and thereby becomes “a case study in why academic history, for all its flaws, still matters” (pp. 52-53). This emphasis on the value of careful academic scholarship becomes a common theme whenever Bell (the tour

guide) describes the intellectual foundations for reliable knowledge, analysis, and viewpoints. “If you don’t rely on and engage with the collective accomplishments of serious scholarship,” Bell writes, “you are going to get the story wrong” (p. 54).<sup>[5]</sup>

Bell thus defends academic history against those who dismiss the subjects, methods, or theories of contemporary historical studies, but he also shows his nonacademic readers that he understands their concerns and perspectives. He praises a book by Philippe Bordes on Jacques-Louis David in one of his chapters by contrasting the prose with the work of another scholar who “like too many art historians today... has a tendency to zoom into the cloudy realm of high-theoretical speculation.” Bordes is more persuasive because he “avoids the feminist and psychoanalytical approach” and the dense Lacanian themes that “casual readers” cannot understand (p. 240). In other words, Bell’s defense of academic work does not prevent him from approaching books with the skepticism of a befuddled foreign visitor. As he explains in his review of a complex novel by Umberto Eco, the postmodernist (fictional) historical narrative is so “labored and confusing” that “negotiating Eco’s circles within circles quickly induces a degree of vertigo” (p. 312-13).<sup>[6]</sup>

Bell stakes out a reassuring middle position on most of the intellectual issues he addresses. Books that focus almost exclusively on material conditions or only on the history of ideas become equally problematic. Discussing Richard Cobb’s work on the French Revolution, Bell complains that this kind of social history gives too little attention to “what the language of liberty, equality, and fraternity might have meant to men and women who sincerely thought they were building a better world” (p. 177). Social historians, he notes in his analysis of Cobb, too often overlook how ideas influence social upheavals and public conflicts, but Bell also criticizes biographical studies that fail to explain the importance of ideas in individual lives. This problem emerges, for example, in Peter McPhee’s otherwise well-informed biography of Robespierre, which in Bell’s view “underplays” the “determination of Robespierre’s mind” and fails to examine Robespierre’s role “as a conductor of revolutionary ideology.” (p. 203).<sup>[7]</sup> Bell never advocates simply for intellectual or cultural history, but he usually dislikes books that ignore the cultural and political power of ideas.

At the same time, however, he definitely dislikes books that ignore the influence of economic and social forces. This analytical flaw appears most conspicuously for Bell in Jonathan Israel’s recent books on the Enlightenment and French Revolution, which he vehemently criticizes for focusing exclusively on a few elite thinkers and leaders.<sup>[8]</sup> Bell argues that Israel’s work exaggerates the political influence of the philosopher Baruch Spinoza, misunderstands how revolutionary activists made decisions, and misses the vast social dimensions of the whole revolutionary upheaval. Israel’s long books thus become for Bell a detailed example of how historians can wrongly imagine ideas to be the great driving force of historical events and also naively project their own ideologies on to past historical actors. “He takes no interest in the common people’s culture,” Bell writes in his critique of Israel’s historical methods, and he “never considers the possibility that they might have conceived and articulated revolutionary political ideas on their own” (p. 207). The history of ideas without real people thus leads to the worst historical distortions because “history does not have the neatness, or the moral clarity, of conspiracy fiction” (p. 213).

Bell recognizes, of course, that ideas influence revolutionary leaders and policies, but he firmly rejects Israel’s claim that a small cadre of “radical Enlightenment” intellectuals could have produced the French Revolution. This argument simply offers “a projection of his own values and ideas back onto a body of evidence that they fit very imperfectly” (p. 135). The tour guide thus warns unwary outsiders that most professional historians strongly disagree with Israel’s tendentious intellectual history of France’s most momentous social and political revolution.

Although the critiques of Jonathan Israel’s books go beyond Bell’s usual middle-range assessments of flaws and insights, they convey his typical descriptions of good and bad historical writing. His reviews

consistently praise clear prose, well-researched scholarship, broad knowledge of recent historical methods, thoughtful analysis of historical complexities, and imaginative arguments based on facts. He supports the legacy of Enlightenment-style reason against postmodern critiques of French rationalism. By contrast, Bell consistently criticizes arcane jargon, weak research, and ignorance of contemporary scholarship, simplistic generalizations, and one-sided approaches to social or intellectual history. He stresses interconnections that link the multiple layers of human experience, even though he knows it is never easy to discern the precise connections between everyday life, public events, and evolving ideas. He assumes that every book omits information that might further clarify the subject it addresses, and so he regularly notes the kinds of research or analysis that would enhance an author's argument.

His reviews suggest, for example, that historians need to write more about the significance of French colonialism and imperial ideologies. Robert Gildea's important book on the long nineteenth century, and Frederick Brown's excellent account of French "culture wars" during the Dreyfus era are both criticized for omitting France's overseas empire from the analysis of key events.[9] Bell himself, however, provides little commentary on French colonialism because his reviews never really focus on this burgeoning field of French historical studies, for which his readers also need a good, interpretive guide.

More discussion of recent works on France's interventions in the Caribbean islands, Africa, and Indochina would thus be a useful addition to the main themes in *Shadows of Revolution*. Such subjects would strengthen Bell's argument that French history helps us understand contemporary conflicts and global issues, many of which can be linked to the legacies of France's imperial system. Despite this absence of colonialism, Bell refers often to other events, conflicts, and themes that connect French history to the twenty-first century and also carry a contemporary resonance.

He writes about Jean-Baptiste Colbert's centralizing system of government surveillance in the 1670s (evoking the constant, modern governmental quest for secret information). He notes the popularity of conspiracy theories from the French Revolution to the Cold War (finding precedents for more recent delusional theories about global Jewish plots or the anti-Americanism of a "Kenyan-born" Barack Obama). He describes virulent attacks on late nineteenth-century French Jews (reminding readers about the repeated scapegoating of minority groups and immigrants in modern democracies). He examines the French culture wars that divided conservative French Catholics from secular republicans during almost every debate about the French Revolution, public education, or national identity (suggesting patterns that appear also in American culture wars about the legacy of the 1960s, history curricula, and multiculturalism). He refers to the French search for "strong" leaders who would make France great again ("Napoleon le petit" and the farcical General Boulanger have their authoritarian analogues in other modern political cultures). He summarizes the endless right-wing attacks that threatened the Third Republic's public institutions and discredited French political leaders (echoed in recent years by France's right-wing National Front and America's angry "Tea-Party" condemnations of the federal government). Finally, he reflects on the moral choices about collaboration and resistance that French intellectuals had to make during the Nazi occupation (pointing to the complex moral choices that arise in all public conflicts and personal lives).

Bell understands how most nonacademic readers like history books that help them think about present-day issues. Historical scholarship therefore attracts wider audiences or public interest when it somehow speaks to the lives and problems of contemporary readers. "One of my greatest ambitions as a historian," Bell writes toward the end of his book, "has been to point, however distantly, to the enduring effects in our own world of patterns of thought and action set long ago." He explains that he particularly wanted his final chapters "to bring out such connections between past and present more explicitly...for a general audience," though he also sees bad examples of historians who "impose" their "own concerns on the past" and create "connections that exist mainly" in their own minds or "own retinas" (p. 371).

Historians can easily construct misleading historical “parallels” when they compare past events with current events, and yet Bell seems willing to run some risks as he develops his own past/present comparisons. He compares the Arab spring upheavals with phases of the French Revolution, and he invokes past republican ideals as he urges French leaders not to abandon their best political traditions by curtailing human rights, scapegoating Muslims, or promoting fears about an “apocalyptic threat” from international terrorism (pp. 394, 415). Public intellectuals write about history with more generalizations than appear in most scholarly books, but their historically informed commentaries also differ from the usual media narratives when they can draw on careful historical research. This fusion of scholarship and the analysis of current events suggests why Bell and other academic historians have to write differently when they become guides and translators for public audiences.

What then is the value of a historical book that consists for the most part of book reviews from nonacademic publications? This question could be used to start our own salon-style conversations with academic colleagues who disagree about the value of writing for public audiences, and Bell’s work could be cited to launch discussions of how book reviewers can best argue for the enduring relevance of French history. As historical research and analysis lose cultural ground within universities, political debates, and contemporary social media, Bell reasserts that we need to see “the continuing importance of political patterns first established during the age of revolutions, when so much of modern political life came into being” (p. 371).

Graduate students who aspire to reach tenured academic positions know that they cannot achieve their goals if their *oeuvre* consists entirely of book reviews and essays in nonacademic magazines, but Bell helps both students and professors recognize why historical writing should not be limited to academic publications. Traditional academic positions and French history books may well become increasingly rare in the United States, which means that the rising generation of talented French historians will have to communicate much of their historical knowledge in an expanding public sphere of web sites, blogs, on-line magazines, and other electronic venues.

This is the realm in which French historical studies can grow and move in new directions. H-France has already opened new electronic pathways to conversations and debates that once appeared only in printed journals, but future versions of H-France and other public forums will carry us beyond the electronic world in which we have now arrived. The boundaries between public and academic writing may become more blurred in the new historical communications, the new construction of historical knowledge, and the new global public sphere.

For all of these reasons, Bell’s engagement with public audiences offers academic historians valuable strategies for sustaining the cultural influence of French historical studies. Like the tour guides who are creating new apps to share cross-cultural knowledge, book reviewers and historians of France will need to expand their public outreach to bring new academic knowledge into wider cultures and debates. Meanwhile, Bell’s hefty printed book confirms that historical book reviews remain essential for public dialogues and for anyone who wants to understand how the past is always present in our lives and societies.

## NOTES

[1] Bell’s important scholarly books include *Lawyers and Citizens: The Making of a Political Elite in Old Regime France* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001); *The First Total War: Napoleon’s Europe and the Birth of Warfare As We Know It* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007); and *Napoleon: A Concise Biography* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[2] These questions are raised in reviews of Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007) and Sophia Rosenfeld, *A Revolution in Language: The Problem of Signs in Late Eighteenth-Century France* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2001).

[3] It should be noted, however, that Bell discusses several key themes of women's history in his generally sympathetic reviews of Olwen Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe, 1500-1800* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1996) and Carla Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).

[4] These people are the subjects of L.W.B. Brockliss, *Calvet's Web: Enlightenment and the Republic of Letters in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), and Carmen Callil, *Bad Faith: A Forgotten History of Family, Fatherland, and Vichy France* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2006). The wartime diary has been published in an English translation: Jean Guéhenno, *Diary of the Dark Years, 1940-1944*, translated by David Ball (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[5] The best-selling books that Bell discusses are David McCullough, *The Greater Journey: Americans in Paris* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011) and Graham Robb, *The Discovery of France: A Historical Geography from the Revolution to the First World War* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2008).

[6] The critiques of complex theories and postmodernist narratives appear in reviews of Philippe Bordes, *Jacques-Louis David: Empire to Exile* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005) and Umberto Eco, *The Prague Cemetery*, translated by Richard Dixon (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011).

[7] The quotations in this paragraph are drawn from reviews of Richard Cobb, *The French and their Revolution, Selected Writings*, edited by David Gilmour (New York: New Press, 1999) and Peter McPhee, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2012).

[8] Bell reviews two of Jonathan Israel's books in different chapters: *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution and Human Rights* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) and *Revolutionary Ideas: An Intellectual History of the French Revolution from the Rights of Man to Robespierre* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014).

[9] These critiques emerge in reviews of Robert Gildea, *Children of the Revolution: The French, 1799-1914* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008) and Frederick Brown, *For the Soul of France: Culture Wars in the Age of Dreyfus* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).

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