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Bette W. Oliver, *Jacques-Pierre Brissot in America and France, 1788-1793: In Search of Better Worlds*. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2016. xiii + 207 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$85.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-4985-3533-5; \$80.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-1-4985-3534-2.

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Despite the ample materials available, we still lack an adequate biography of Jacques-Pierre Brissot, the minor philosophe and journalist-turned-revolutionary Girondin politician who led France's charge to war in 1791-1792. Bette W. Oliver's monograph on Brissot's experiences of post-revolutionary America and revolutionary France nevertheless joins the products of a minor industry in studies of various aspects of Brissot's complex and much-debated career, and has, if nothing else, the merit of bringing a fresh angle. It also, as we shall see, lacks the partisanship of much recent debate concerning Brissot's pre-revolutionary activities. Nevertheless, these controversies provide an inescapable context for any work on Brissot, so it is worth revisiting them here in some detail.

One reason, perhaps, why no recent scholar has yet attempted a full-scale biography of Brissot is Robert Darnton's repeated statements that he has a draft biography sitting in his office drawer, which may have discouraged others from endeavouring to produce a rival manuscript.[1] Another is the much-contested and problematic revelations contained in the same author's 1968 controversial article "The Grub-Street Style of Revolution".[2] On the basis of a passing comment in the unpublished memoirs of the police minister Lenoir, and a "suggestive gap" in the Bastille archives where Brissot's dossier should have been, Darnton suggested that Brissot was a police spy and probably involved in the production of pornographic *libelles* against Marie-Antoinette and the French court: "Brissot sent inside information to [his publishers in] Neuchâtel because he really was an insider among the secret police as his enemies charged. He was probably a spy, and his spying probably concerned the *libelle* style of pamphleteering that contributed to his support before the revolution and his downfall during it." [3] These allegations have haunted studies of Brissot ever since.

Since Darnton made this claim, there have, however, been numerous studies of aspects of Brissot's career. The fullest is Suzanne d'Huart's study, *Brissot, La Gironde au pouvoir*, [4] the first study to utilize Brissot's personal papers, which were rediscovered in 1982 and purchased by the Archives nationales. The Brissot papers include the transcript of Brissot's interrogation in the Bastille in 1783, following his entrapment and arrest for alleged involvement in producing *libelles* against the Queen and leading ministers. [5] D'Huart's account did not definitively pronounce on the question of Brissot's complicity in producing *libelles*. However, according to this reviewer, close examination of his interrogation and related documentation in the Archives nationales dossier bears out his protests that he was innocent. [6] This was also the conclusion of Paris's Lieutenant-General of Police, Lenoir, (though in his memoirs he suggested otherwise). Instead, Brissot appears to have been framed by his arch-enemy, the muckraking journalist, scandalmonger and spy, Charles Théveneau de Morande, whose enmity and printed poisons would plague Brissot for the rest of his life. [7] Together with revelations that Lenoir deleted his allegations that Brissot was a spy from later drafts of his memoirs, probably because he wished to limit

his definition of spy to those who traded in information, this evidence seems to call into question both the spy and *libelliste* charges against Brissot.[8] Equally Darnton's portrayal of Brissot as a failed wannabe philosophe has been challenged by, among others, Elisabeth Eisenstein and Frederick A. de Luna, and their arguments appear to have been vindicated by Leonore Loft's path-breaking, if hagiographic, study of Brissot's thought, *Passion, Politics and Philosophie: Rediscovering J.-P. Brissot*. [9] Unfortunately, the wider merits of Loft's work are over-shadowed by her incautious eulogies, including the equation of the warmongering Brissot with Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela. [10]

Nevertheless, Loft's study had the merit of offering more detailed analysis of the ideas contained in Brissot's book and pamphlets than any previous authority. However, Loft does not consider Brissot's journalism in his newspaper, the *Patriote français*, nor offer a great deal of biographical detail. The opposite might be said of Robert Darnton's rather anodyne study of Brissot's relationship with his Swiss publisher, the Société typographique de Neuchâtel. It reveals much of the minutiae of Brissot's business dealings, but little of wider historical significance. [11] There is also little there to reinforce Darnton's earlier debunking of Brissot's claims to be a high-minded and disinterested philosophe. For that, readers might instead look to Darnton's 1989 essay, "Ideology on the Bourse," which offers apparently compelling evidence that in the late 1780s Brissot and Mirabeau penned pamphlets to manipulate stock prices in collusion with their patron, the financier Etienne Clavière, who would go on to be finance minister under the Girondin ministry. [12] Yet this too has now been challenged by James Livesey and Richard Whatmore's forensic dissection of the political implications of the stocks that Brissot and Mirabeau attacked, which shows that they were stocks aligned to government policy. The financial pamphleteering was more a tool of political faction than financial speculation. [13]

By focusing on the last five years of Brissot's life, from his visit to America in 1788 to his death under the guillotine blade in October 1793, Bette W. Oliver sidesteps such debates and, to a large extent, the partisanship they have engendered. If we discount the work of protagonists in the debate, Oliver's work is also the first major study to emerge since my 2003 article, "The Innocence of Jacques-Pierre Brissot," attempted to offer a final word on these debates and avoid some of the pitfalls of previous studies. Her Brissot is neither saint nor sinner, but a flawed flesh-and-blood idealist, whose values and integrity are sometimes found lacking under the extraordinary pressures of revolutionary activism and a political role for which he was ill-prepared. This indeed moves the debate on.

Oliver's account is set out in seven chapters. The first, "Early French Perspectives on America," is a synthetic background treatment that gives us a lightning tour of the works of the usual suspects of Pauw, Raynal, Chastellux, and Crèvecoeur; Rousseau's noble savage; Voltaire's views on Quakers; and the influence of Benjamin Franklin. If much seems familiar here, it is not just a list of predictable names. It is also, in part, because twenty-one out of forty-two references in the chapter are taken from Echeverria's *Mirage in the West*, and remarkably these references appear (with one exception) in exact page order. [14] Oliver's second chapter, "Brissot in America," depends almost exclusively on Brissot's own account of his trip in his *Nouveau Voyage dans les Etats-Unis de l'Amérique Septentrionale* (1788) and attempts to assess the influence of America on Brissot. Her third chapter concerns the early French Revolution and is titled "Great Expectations, Paris 1789-1790." It offers a largely narrative account of the revolution, with occasional discussions of Brissot's role. The most interesting part of this chapter and, for most readers probably the most novel, is Oliver's treatment of the Scioto company's attempts to entice migrants to Ohio, a topic which extends over a dozen pages. Unfortunately, the tangential relevance of these dealings to Brissot—a promoter of land settlements, but critic of the company—only becomes clear at page sixty-five. That half a chapter is devoted to this topic here is somewhat anomalous.

Oliver's fourth chapter covers 1791 and 1792 and is entitled "Legislating Change," although it also deals extensively with Brissot's journalism and covers the period around and following Brissot's belated election to the Legislative Assembly. Chapter five, "From Monarchy to Republic," covers the period from the war debates in January 1792 to the King's trial and execution in January 1793, via the

overthrow of the monarchy and the September massacres, all momentous chapters in the revolutionary saga in which the Girondins were heavily involved, but on which Oliver has little strikingly new to add. Chapter six, “War, Division, and Terror,” takes Brissot’s life story to its tragic conclusion under the guillotine, and although drawing strongly on the same secondary sources as the previous chapter, also, when compared to previous chapters, contains references to a wider smattering of different primary sources, mostly Girondin memoirs. A seventh and final chapter on the “Destruction of the Dream” offers a potted history of the fate of those Girondin fugitives who were still on the run when Brissot was executed, of Brissot’s wife and children, and the rise of Napoleon.

Unfortunately, Oliver’s study falls between two stalls. It offers neither a sustained original biographical intervention into the long-running debates about Brissot’s character nor a detailed study of his ideas sufficient to replace Leonore Loft’s wide-ranging, if flawed, intellectual biography. Further, the author does not mention much of the literature described above concerning Brissot’s formation. Her bibliography does not mention Darnton’s study of *Brissot and the Société Typographique de Neuchâtel*, nor his “Philosophie on the Bourse.” She also seems to be unaware of Livesey and Whatmore’s refutation of the latter nor even Donna Harsanyi’s essay on Brissot’s debates with the Marquis de Chastellux on America, “How to make a revolution without firing a shot,” an essay highly relevant to her theme. [15] Studies of the London *libellistes* by the current reviewer and Robert Darnton (as part of his wider ranging study on political slander), as well as my biography of Brissot’s arch-enemy, Charles Théveneau de Morande, are also missing from her reading list. [16] So are two important treatments focused on his early career: François Primo’s *La Jeunesse de Brissot* [17] and Suzanne d’Huart’s aforementioned *Brissot. La Gironde au pouvoir*, which remains essential reading because of its use of new source material from the Brissot papers. Moreover, Oliver has depended almost exclusively on printed secondary and memoir sources for her resource base. She appears not, for example, to have consulted Brissot’s journalism in the original, preferring to quote extensively from snippets reproduced in a hundred-year old secondary work (see below). Nor has she mined the riches of Brissot’s papers in the Archives nationales, 446AP, particularly the second tranche of papers, acquired in the mid-1990s, which contain significant materials relating to Brissot’s time in America and debates with Chastellux.

If the resource base is thin, the narrative spine for several of the chapters is provided by a single study or group of studies, with citations from each individual work generally appearing in the same page order as in the original. Chapter one, as already noted, provides a case in point. Likewise, thirty-nine out of forty-seven references in chapter four are drawn from Eloise Ellery’s 1915 study *Brissot de Warville: A Study in the History of the French Revolution*, which is the exclusive source for Oliver’s references to Brissot’s newspaper journalism. [18] Chapter five has a wider resource base, but draws primarily on Ellery’s study (twenty-three footnote references), Sydenham’s *The Girondins* (fourteen references) and Owen Connelly’s aging lower undergraduate level textbook treatment of *The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Era*, which was published in 1979 (twenty references). [19] The chapter on “Brissot in America, 1788” looks more promising, but is presented as a “blow by blow” synopsis of each of the letters that comprise his pamphlet *Nouveau Voyage dans les Etats-Unis de l’Amérique Septentrionale* (1788). A more analytical approach would surely have been more engaging and offered further insights. The result is a patchy, narrative-driven synthesis of earlier sources that will satisfy neither undergraduate students nor specialists. Nevertheless, Oliver opens a window on some new questions and offers a more realistic and less partisan view of the ambiguities of Brissot’s character than much of the work undertaken since Darnton published “The Grub Street Style of Revolution” in 1968. For these reasons, at least, it is perhaps to be welcomed in spite of its limited and summary exploitation of the available primary and secondary source material. Brissot still awaits, and deserves, his definitive biographer.

#### NOTES

[1] In his 1991 article, “The Brissot Dossier,” *French Historical Studies* 17/1 (1991): 191-205, Darnton announces his intent to produce a biography of Brissot (p. 192). Twelve years later, Robert Darnton in *George Washington’s False Teeth: An Unconventional Guide to the Eighteenth Century* (London and New York: Norton, 2003) refers to a 500-page biography sitting in his office drawer (p. 161).

- [2] Robert Darnton, "The Grub Street style of revolution: J.-P. Brissot, police spy," *Journal of Modern History* 40(1968): 301-327.
- [3] Darnton, "The Grub Street style of revolution," p. 325.
- [4] Suzanne d'Huart, *Brissot, La Gironde au pouvoir* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1986).
- [5] The first tranche of Brissot papers are now held at 446AP/1-24 in the Archives nationales. A second tranche, largely relating to the Americas, was acquired in the mid-1990s. The archivist in charge of series AP, Mme Ducros, kindly gave me access to the latter in 1995, but they contained little of direct interest for my own studies. Brissot scholars do not seem to have sufficiently examined this second tranche of papers since.
- [6] Simon Burrows, "The Innocence of Jacques-Pierre Brissot," *Historical Journal* 46/4(2003): 843-71.
- [7] See Burrows, "The Innocence of Brissot," or the fuller treatment of Brissot's relations with Morande in Simon Burrows, *A King's Ransom: A Life of Charles Théveneau de Morande, Blackmailer, Scandalmonger, & Master-Spy* (London: Continuum, 2010).
- [8] Burrows, "The Innocence of Brissot."
- [9] Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *Grub Street Abroad: Aspects of the French Cosmopolitan Press from the age of Louis XV to the Enlightenment* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1992), chapters four and five; Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, "Bypassing the Enlightenment: Taking an Underground Route to Revolution," in H. T. Mason, ed., *The Darnton Debate: Books and Revolution in the Eighteenth Century*, *SVEC* 359 (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1998), 157-177; Frederick A. de Luna, "The Dean Street Style of Revolution: J.-P. Brissot, *jeune philosophe*," *French Historical Studies* 17/1 (1991): 159-190; Leonore Loft, *Passion, Politics and Philosophie. Rediscovering J.-P. Brissot* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2003).
- [10] See Loft, *Passion, Politics, Philosophie*, p xviii.
- [11] Robert Darnton, "J.-P. Brissot and the Société Typographique de Neuchâtel (1779-1787)," *SVEC* 10 (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2001), 1-47.
- [12] Robert Darnton, "Ideology on the Bourse," in Michel Vovelle, ed., *L'Image de la Révolution française*, vol. 1 (Paris: Pergamon, 1989), pp. 124-139.
- [13] Richard Whatmore and James Livesey, "Etienne Clavière, Jacques-Pierre Brissot et les fondations intellectuelles de la politique des Girondins," *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 321(2000): 1-26.
- [14] Durand Echeverria, *Mirage in the West. A History of the French Image of American Society to 1815* (New York: Octagon Books, 1966).
- [15] Whatmore and Livesey, "Clavière, Brissot et les fondations intellectuelles de la politique des Girondins;" Donna Harsanyi, "How to make a revolution without firing a shot: thoughts on the Brissot-Chastellux polemic (1786-1788)," *French History* 22/2(2008): 197-216.
- [16] Robert Darnton, *The Devil in the Holy Water or the Art of Slander from Louis XIV to Napoleon* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); Simon Burrows, *Blackmail, Scandal and Revolution: London's French Exile Libellistes, 1758-1792* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006); Burrows, *A King's Ransom*.

[17] François Primo's *La Jeunesse de Brissot* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1932).

[18] Eloise Ellery, *Brissot de Warville: A Study in the History of the French Revolution* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1915, repr. New York: Burt Franklin, 1970).

[19] M. J. Sydenham, *The Girondins* (London: The Athlone Press, 1961); Owen Connelly, *The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Era* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979).

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