
Review by Simon Burrows, Western Sydney University.

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author's 1968 controversial article "The Grub-Street Style of Revolution".[2] On the basis of a passing comment in the unpublished memoirs of the police minister Lenoir, and a "suggestive gap" in the Bastille archives where Brissot's dossier should have been, Darnton suggested that Brissot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
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 Crevecoeur; 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 États-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. 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. So are two important treatments focused on his early career: François Primo’s La Jeunesse de Brissot 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. 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). 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


[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.


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