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James B. Collins, *From Tribes to Nation: The Making of Modern France, 500-1789*. Toronto and London: Wadsworth-Thomson Learning, 2002. xlii + 750 pp. Introduction, maps, illustrations, notes, appendix, bibliography, and index. \$42.95 US (pb). ISBN 0-15-500257-0.

The last five chapters are also published separately as *The Ancien Regime and the French Revolution*. Toronto and London: Wadsworth-Thomson Learning, 2002. xxviii + 277 pp. Introduction, maps, illustrations, notes, appendix, bibliography, and index. \$34.95 US (pb). ISBN 0-15-507387-7.

Review by John M. Burney, Loras College.

It takes a certain courage to write a textbook covering a long chronological period. Courage in two senses. First is the courage to step outside the bounds of one's own research and make judgments about other areas and periods, thus risking the wrath of the experts in those fields. This risk is compounded by the fact that it is not just the difference in chronological periods but the full ranks of cultural, versus social, versus political, versus diplomatic historians which must be risked. Second is that detailed, lengthy texts flaunt the current pedagogical wave. Rather than wanting a text that provides large amounts of information (and in which the interesting debates to make decisions on interpretation are largely held within the mind of the author), many faculty are opting for shorter texts and larger collections of primary sources so that students, individually or in groups, do the work of constructing the knowledge and forming an interpretation themselves, for communication to the rest of the class. This approach, once common only in seminars, has permeated higher education at all levels down to surveys and first-year courses. One can see the movement to briefer texts in the titles of those written for the French Revolution, as we move from Jeremy Popkin's, *A Short History of the French Revolution* to William Doyle's, *The French Revolution: A Very Short Introduction*. [1]

To negotiate those shoals a historian needs a clear chart—large themes that allow for variations but in the end provide students with an interpretive framework to make sense of the murky depths and shifting currents. James B. Collins has demonstrated this courage, and by and large has achieved the clarity by aggressively pursuing one larger question throughout his unique survey of French history from 500-1789: how did French national identity emerge? He recognizes that national identity is not monolithic and that it is continually evolving, yet he draws a clear thread from the identity of Franks to the creation of the French Republic. Collins asserts that the nation developed in four steps. First, the tribal identity of the Franks gave way to the feudal monarchy of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Second, the French evolved into a political commonwealth by the fourteenth century. Third, the development of the absolute monarchy (which, of course, was never absolute) turned away from this concept. Fourth, the French Revolution swept away the absolute monarchy to create a modern Republic, but one which in many ways was originally built upon the old concept of a larger commonwealth, a nation whose interests lay above the monarch. Thus the Revolution emerges not as an aberration but as a continuation of a thousand year development toward a French national identity.

In telling this story, Collins uses political chronology to move the text forward, but spends substantial sections and chapters in discussion of economic, cultural, intellectual, and social history as integral parts of the whole. For faculty teaching French history, one of the virtues of such a text is to pull together the

variety of recent research into a coherent form, aided by copious notes and comments at the end of each chapter. These endnotes contain details and references, often of more use to the instructor than to the undergraduate student, bringing in relevant discussions that might bog down the main text. At the end of chapter five, for example, the endnotes range from detailing Charles VII's claim to Naples to explaining how the modern term housewife has misleading connotations for the role women played as economic managers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (pp. 228-29).

Perhaps realizing that one has to reach graduate student status to truly appreciate and read endnotes, however, Collins provides copious help for undergraduates within the text. He frequently pauses the narrative to provide a simple listing of points to guide the student. For example, in discussing the loss of legitimacy of the French monarchy by the 1780s and the inability of the government to solve the fundamental questions of debt and property, he indicates:

The state, by its essence, could not solve this problem because it rested on three principles that could not survive the changing social, economic, and political reality of the eighteenth century:

1. Everyone was unequal.
2. The king held sovereignty, the ability to make law equally binding on all.
3. Protection of the rights of "citizens," especially their property rights, lay in the realm of contract rather than law (p. 496).

Collins also provides other aids that are very useful. There are frequent boxes providing a separate chronology for each chapter. The ample images and the maps are well done, although a student might wish for more of the latter. The map of Revolutionary France, for example, shows the student where Varennes is located seventy pages after the flight to Varennes has been discussed in the text. Among the most intriguing study-aids are the frequent boxes containing additional data outside the flow of the narrative. These add a layer of depth to the material. They range from primary sources, such as the grievances in the Norman peasant rebellion of 997 as told in the *Roman de Rou* (pp. 38-39) or the general *cahier* of the Bailiwick of D'Aval in 1789 (p. 530), to conventional discussions of key issues such as "Eleanor of Aquitaine and Chivalry" (pp. 73-74) and the relationship of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette (p. 495). Also included are telling small discussions such as "The Village Cow: Aubermesnil, 1695-1789" (pp. 440-41), a brief illustration of the changing patterns of village life, and "Figaro: The Political Barber" (p. 501), a demonstration of the loss of government control over cultural life. These short discussions not only enliven the text with interesting anecdotes and information, but also provide a richer texture to the complex interweaving of cultures into the French identity. The box discussing Danton and Robespierre, for example, includes mention of the film "Danton" by Wajda, comments by Michelet, Mona Ozouf, and R.R. Palmer, and excerpts from letters by Ruault written at the time of Danton's arrest and trial (pp. 636-38).

Inevitably, however, in such a text choices must be made. That perhaps can be seen most clearly just by the weight of the number of pages devoted to each era: one-third of the book sweeps us from 275 to 1559; the second third takes us into the eighteenth century; and the final third is devoted to the last fifty years of the 1700s, largely to the ten years of the Revolution. Since Collins is juggling so many strands of history, some of the earlier chapters may be a little difficult to follow for students who have not first had a general Western Civilization or European history survey, thus making the text most suitable for upper division classes. Carolingian and early medieval kings sweep by quickly so that students at times have little more than a rapid list of names. But then Collins begins to put the brakes on as he moves forward, until by the time of the French Revolution he is able to pause and revel in telling details that allow his discussion of events of 1789 to provide more depth than many surveys. Collins, for example, did his own research (before the appearance of the book by John Markoff and Gilbert Shapiro[2]) in order to make a clear claim as to the revolutionary content of the *cahiers*; and he makes a firm effort to tie provincial opinion to events in Paris by bringing forth little known but telling examples, such as the

lawyer Jean Navier of Dijon who spread the patriot program among the presidents of Burgundian provincial assemblies (pp. 529-35).

The chapters on the French Revolution, which are also being published separately along with an additional twenty pages of documents for those who need a text only for the revolutionary era, illustrates the clarity of Collins argument and his judicious judgments. Reviewing the lively historiographical debate over the interpretation of the French Revolution, he attempts, by and large successfully, to synthesize the interpretations of the Classicists and the Revisionists. He agrees with the Classicists that the Revolution was inevitable because the political system no longer reflected the underlying economic and social structure of France; that the Revolution did create a modern definition of property (recognizing that elements of it existed under the Old Regime but that the Revolution was key for the abolition of the last forms of feudal property, as well as of private regulation by guilds or venal office-holders of certain sectors of the economy); and that class differences did have some impact on events of the Revolution. But he agrees with the Revisionists that class differences do not explain the behavior of many of the actors in the Revolution. Collins indicates that he accepts “wholeheartedly the Revisionist argument that the Revolution was primarily a political event.” Its emphasis on the creation of a male democracy had “profound implications for social and cultural life” (p. 520). In that political context, the Revolution could not have been prevented by Louis XVI because, even in his speech of June 23, 1789 in which he conceded a number of reforms, he was unable to concede the fundamental demand that the Estates General should become a National Assembly to write a constitution for France. That revolutionary demand was expressed, albeit in traditional language, in the cahiers. It represents for Collins not just the culmination of eighteenth-century discontent, but the end of the long, thousand-year road traveled by the concept of a commonwealth above the monarch. But the Revolution then created a new strain of nationalism, a Jacobin concept that “democratized society to an extent that demolished all preconceptions of the social order, of social identity, and of national identity” (p. 698), and that is still being worked out today.

Thus, Collins has provided a well-written, coherent interpretation of a thousand years of French history, which also makes ample room for the variety of the French experience. Whether it is selected by an instructor really depends on the purpose and pedagogy being used in an individual class. Those who desire students to construct their own interpretations will do well to use the combination of comment and primary texts in books such as Lynn Hunt’s *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*.<sup>[3]</sup> But those who seek a coherent, detailed telling of the story of the development of the French national identity would do well to examine Collins’s text.

## NOTES

[1] Jeremy Popkin, *A Short History of the French Revolution*, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1998); and William Doyle, *The French Revolution: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[2] John Markhoff and Gilbert Shapiro, *Revolutionary Demands: A Content Analysis of the Cahiers de Doleances of 1789* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

[3] Lynn Hunt, *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History* (Boston and New York: Bedford Books, 1996).

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