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Peter McPhee, *The French Revolution 1789-1799*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. 234 pp. Maps, chronology, notes, bibliography, and index. \$19.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-19-924414-6.

Review by Sydney Watts, University of Richmond.

A succinct and clearly stated narrative of the French Revolution is an extremely valuable teaching tool, and Peter McPhee has written just that in little more than two hundred pages. Complete with physical and political maps of France, Paris, and the *Vendée militaire*, a chronology that follows the Gregorian calendar, and a selective guide to further reading in English, this textbook provides a useful compendium for newcomers to the history of the French Revolution. Its narrative focus bucks the recent tides in the publishing world that have emphasized wide-ranging document collections and textbooks full of color illustrations and multi-media glamour. What great educational value this “text-only version” offers in a single, sustained voice with an easy literary style is a clear set of historical problems to explore: Why was there a Revolution in France in 1789? Why did it prove so difficult to stabilize the Revolution after 1789? When was it over? And how “revolutionary” was the French Revolution?

McPhee treats these central questions with remarkable clarity and didactic purpose over nine chapters that are organized both chronologically and thematically. The first two chapters consider the pre-revolutionary period and provide an impressively concise introduction to old regime social structure that will be clear to any novice in the field. The middle chapters emphasize the turning points from the Revolution of 1789 (chapter three) to the Second Revolution in 1792 (chapter five) and the Terror (chapter seven), highlighting the important contingencies in this chain of events in order to make sense of the radical shifts of power. The final chapters address essential issues in this area of study, such as how to put a halt to the Revolution, how to assess its impact on the population of France, and how to measure its lasting significance for students of history. In each case, McPhee is careful to make these final judgments with nuance, providing various perspectives that will lead students to deeper reflection on cause and effect rather than to radically overarching or excessively relativistic conclusions.

Throughout the book, McPhee provides the reader with specific examples drawn from his own scholarship on the village of Gabian in Languedoc and the west coast city of La Rochelle, as well as other regional monographs. While McPhee is careful not to get embroiled in historical debates and remains decidedly non-partisan, he does not sacrifice the power of argument, cautiously critiquing much of the revisionist literature for its polemical and overly simplistic explanations. McPhee’s nimble corrective of other historians does not mean he avoids current trends in historiography, such as the “political culture” of the Revolution. In this regard McPhee’s book is a work of synthesis. Rather than using political culture as a conceptual tool to explore and explain the Revolution in new ways, he selectively draws on examples of revolutionary festivals, the role of theatrical literature, and the explosion of political pornography put forth by other historians. Moreover, the book emphasizes more fundamental issues of women and their role in the Revolution and the ruptures in religious life that were felt to different degrees throughout France. Having been familiarized by McPhee with revolutionary scholarship, the reader arrives at the final chapters ready to grapple with larger and more complex historical questions, such as the role of the Roman Catholic church after dechristianization, dictatorship and the rise of nationalism, and the rights of women and minorities under a modern liberal state.

To be sure, no short history of this complex decade can include every social, political, cultural, economic or military aspect from the past twenty years of new scholarship. This edition foregoes many economic questions about the changing role of wage laborers and guild masters and mistresses, the instability of the *assignat*, and the attempts to correct the problem of supply with the general maximum. Nevertheless, this book does make a strong case for changes in the nature of the French economy from a macro-economic point of view. McPhee contends that these changes were to facilitate capitalist practices, “creating the environment within which capitalist industry and agriculture would thrive” (p. 190). While the economic booms (and busts) of the nineteenth century in some ways prove this thesis, historians will continue to argue over the ways in which this environment came about.

Sydney E. Watts □
University of Richmond
□ swatts@richmond.edu

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