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Jay M. Smith, *Nobility Reimagined. The Patriotic Nation in Eighteenth-Century France*. Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 2005. xv + 307pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography and index. \$49.95 U.S. (hb). \$29.95 (pb). ISBN 0-8014-8949-0.

Review by Tim Blanning, University of Cambridge.

Based on c. 160 treatises and pamphlets published during the eighteenth century, this exercise in the history of ideas seeks to trace the developing relationship between the French nobility and the French *patrie* between the late seventeenth century and the outbreak of the Revolution. As the title suggests, it is presented as a collective recasting of the mental images through which the nobles made sense of their role: “The French *thought* their way to the construction of a patriotic nation by renegotiating the relationship between rank and equality, and by reimagining the meaning of nobility” (p. 11). The impetus came from a sense of crisis engendered by the policies of Louis XIV. Although current historiography plays down his “absolutism” and stresses the symbiosis of monarch and magnate, some contemporary voices loudly proclaimed the opposite. In 1688 in *Les Caractères de Théophraste, traduits du Grec, avec les caractères et les moeurs de ce siècle*, Jean de la Bruyère scolded his compatriots for having been lulled into decadence by Louis XIV’s pomp, spectacles, and luxury, thus allowing their master to make giant strides towards despotism. He added that “there is no *patrie* in a despotic [government]”, because its place is taken by “interest, glory and the service of the prince” (pp. 29-30).

The most influential of these critics was François de la Mothe-Fénelon, Archbishop of Cambrai and tutor to the duke of Burgundy from 1689 until his dismissal in 1697 for his support for the Quietists. Fénelon’s *The Adventures of Telemachus* of 1699 was one of the great publishing success stories of the eighteenth century, being translated into several foreign languages as well as going through forty-eight French editions, nine of them in the 1780s. Only the most literal of readers could fail to spot that this was a critique of Louis XIV’s regime, based as it was on brazen selfishness and a systematic “banishment of virtue.” What was needed was not a republican form of government, for Fénelon feared the despotism of the multitude every bit as much as the despotism of the individual, but a return to republican moral austerity, especially the eradication of luxury, for “as arbitrary power is the bane of kings, so luxury poisons a whole nation.” The enormous success of *Telemachus* with succeeding generations of French nobles was the most important single contribution to the establishment of classical patriotism as a moral guide for dealing with the twin modern afflictions of despotism and luxury.

It was Montesquieu, of course, who presented the most authoritative version in *The Spirit of the Laws*, a work even more influential than *Telemachus*. Smith quotes approvingly Bernard Manin’s judgment that Montesquieu was “the Newton of the moral world”, because he reduced to a system the often conflicting ideas that had shaped civic thought since Fénelon (p. 67). In his famous typology, Montesquieu identified as the governing principle of despotisms fear, of republics virtue and of monarchies honor. Yet he left plenty of room for argument as to how he assessed the last two: was he defending and advancing the claims of honor, or was he satirizing and denouncing it? In certain circumstances, he allowed, honor could have beneficial effects, because it prompted men to undertake difficult but beneficial tasks without hope of material reward. It seems most likely that he hoped that a form of patriotic virtue could be found that did not require an egalitarian social framework and could therefore flourish in monarchies.

The problems that had led to a crisis of confidence towards the end of Louis XIV’s reign only got worse after 1715, dramatically so after the outbreak of the disastrous Seven Years War, so the perceived need

to find a viable form of patriotism intensified. In 1764 the comte de Forges wrote that ‘I hear nothing but cries in favor of the patrie, I see nothing but works recommending patriotism’. Smith exemplifies the two possible varieties of patriotism by examining in some detail two contrasting works: the Abbé Gabriel-François Coyer’s *La Noblesse commerçante* of 1756 and the chevalier d’Arc’s *La Noblesse militaire, opposée à la noblesse commerçante; ou, Le Patriote francois*, which appeared a few months later and was—as the title suggests—a direct reply. Coyer, the son of a merchant, was very much a modernist, criticizing the parasitical nobility and denouncing the refusal to work for a living as “a continual crime committed against the nation.” The chevalier d’Arc, on the other hand, as might have been expected from a former soldier decorated for gallantry and moreover one who was the illegitimate son of an illegitimate son of Louis XIV, was very much of the old school, albeit one that was to be reinvigorated by adopting the language of patriotism: “I am unable to distinguish, in the bottom of my heart, between the prince and the *patrie*.”

So which of these two ways of reimagining the nobility would carry the day? Was it to be Coyer’s vision of a nobility formed by virtue and therefore open to all regardless of birth? Or was it to be d’Arc’s improved version of the *noblesse de race*? It was the latter that seemed to be winning the argument at court, for in 1732 Louis XV required proof of three centuries of nobility before he would allow an aspiring courtier to be formally presented. In 1759 that formidable bar was raised still higher when it was pushed back to 1400. Yet, as in so many other respects, what was happening at Versailles was seriously out of kilter with developments elsewhere in France. Smith is well aware of this, as he demonstrates with—among other things—an interesting exegesis of Necker’s *On the Administration of Finances in France* which lauded public opinion as the “tribunal where all men who attract the attention of others are obliged to present themselves” (p. 240). Yet he also insists that there was a real choice to be made here and moreover that the victory of the meritocratic option was not a foregone conclusion: “The assertions of noble corporate solidarity that marked French political discussion from the fall of 1788 were not ‘anachronistic’ invocations of long-moribund social categories, ill-considered reactions of alarm on the part of politically naive nobles, or a convenient pretext for political radicalization carried out by ‘extremist’ proponents of the third estate.” It is an ingenious hypothesis, but it does not seem to me that sufficient evidence has been found to make it wholly convincing.

The focus on the nobility’s conceptions of the patrie has also perhaps led to a neglect of their attitude towards the first noble of the kingdom, the head of the house of Bourbon. Numerous are the references to Louis XIV, but his two successors hardly feature at all. There are just two index entries for Louis XV and five for Louis XVI. So when, for example, Smith refers in his conclusion to his central concern: “the long-term process of conceptual reordering—the collective reimagining of nobility and nation” (p. 266), one has to ask oneself: why not “the collective reimagining of king, nobility and nation.” There is the occasional recognition that the sleazy decadence of Louis XV and the clumsy incompetence of his grandson had a bearing on how the nobility viewed their relations with monarchy and *patrie*, but this aspect is never pursued. Nor is the international dimension. Although much of interest is written about the comte de Guibert, for example, it is never revealed that he was also a passionate admirer of Frederick the Great, whom he regarded as “peerless, much greater than Caesar.”[1] Nor is there any awareness that as the crisis deepened in 1787, the French military nobles—who after all form an important part of Smith’s constituency—were appalled by the failure of Louis XVI to intervene in the Dutch Republic to stop the Prussian invasion. Exemplifying this autarchic perspective is his reference to Voltaire’s mocking of “the absurd baroness Thunder-ten-Tronck”, apparently unaware that the baroness was not French but German and that it was German uncouthness not the French nobility that was being derided. The French nobles took a very keen interest in what was happening outside their country, especially across the Rhine; it is a shame that so many historians of France do not share their curiosity.

Yet despite these few reservations, one must admire the fluency of the writing and the vivacity with which the contemporary publications are brought to life. Interesting new insights are offered on, among others, Mirabeau père's *L'Ami des hommes* (1756), Rossel's *Histoire du patriotisme françois* (1769), Basset de la Marelle's *La différence du patriotisme national chez les François et chez les Anglois* (1762) and even Choderlos de Laclos' *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1781). There are many well-chosen illustrations. The text is mercifully free of the verbal contortions and conceptual hair-splitting that the genre sometimes attracts. Although he quotes the views of John Pocock with respect, as well he might, he himself adopts a robustly common-sense approach to a discursive approach: "Discourses' are not historical agents. In fact, discourses do not exist at all—except in the inventive minds of outside observers who, for analytical convenience, abstract words from individual and intersubjective processes of moral and conceptual negotiation and bring them together in a putatively meaningful whole" (p. 256). Smith's mind is indeed inventive. If what he has found there is not the whole story, it is certainly an original and stimulating contribution to a bigger picture.

NOTES

[1] *Éloge du roi de Prusse. : Par l'auteur de l'Essai general de tactique* (Paris, 1787), p. 238. See also his *Observations on the military establishment and discipline of His Majesty the King of Prussia: with an account of the private life of that celebrated monarch; and occasional anecdotes of the principal persons of his court: interspersed with descriptions of Berlin, Potsdam, Sans Souci, Charlottenbourg* (London, 1787).

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