

David Andress, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the French Revolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. xvii + 683. £95. ISBN 9780199639748.

The Oxford Handbook of the French Revolution is a mammoth contribution to this most complex and commented upon event. The book contains thirty-seven chapters, organised under six broadly traditional themes, stretching from the origins to the legacies of the Revolution. David Andress has brought together an impressive range of scholars, both early career and established, mainly from Anglophone institutions. In a brief but direct ‘Foreword’ Andress confronts the main challenge facing the editor and contributors to this volume: what is it trying to achieve in the crowded marketplace of books on the French Revolution? Andress signals clearly that the book is an attempt to capture and address on-going debates, both to take stock and to map out potential paths for future research.

As a result, many of the essays have a welcome historiographic focus. Andress notes in his ‘Foreword’ that some essays take traditional themes and re-examine them afresh. Lauren R. Clay’s essay on the role of the bourgeoisie in the origins of the Revolution provides a very fine example. Clay surveys the Marxist and revisionist assessments of the bourgeoisie, and then charts a path out of the ‘Marxist-revisionist impasse’ (28). Rather than resurrecting class, Clay points *inter alia* to the connections between consumption and ‘the development of new concepts of individuality, liberty, rights, and citizenship’ in the decades before 1789. As a whole, the volume reflects strongly the move of French Revolution historiography beyond the revisionist analysis which dominated the bicentenary commemorations, with François Furet coming in for particular critique in some essays. Michael Fitzsimmons, for example, argues that the Constitution of 1791 deserves more attention and, indeed, more praise than it has traditionally received. But if many of the contributors are clear on the deficiencies of previous interpretations of the Revolution, they are in no rush to assert a new defining paradigm. Andress makes this point in his essay on the sans-culottes. Following a judicious assessment of the literature, he concludes that ‘the historical picture of popular protest and politicization through these years remains unclear.’ Other contributors adopt a similar approach. Some, like Marc Belissa, in his thoughtful essay on ‘War and Diplomacy (1792-1795)’, end with an explicit list of research paths. In a similar vein, Mike Rapport’s important survey of ‘Jacobinism from outside’ concludes by emphasising the need for further research on this crucial subject. Other contributors are in a position to offer stronger conclusions. In his excellent essay ‘What was the Terror?’, Dan Edelstein registers the attempts by Marxists and revisionists to explain why the Terror occurred, before opting for a ‘middle way’ and, in his case, drawing attention to the significance of the deficiencies in French legal culture as a means of explaining what occurred.

As Edelstein’s contribution signals, this book is – of course – more than an exercise in historiographical stocktaking and all of the essays bring something to the discussion of their particular topics and a few provide strikingly original insights. Manuel Covo places the colonial question at the heart of the revolutionary narrative by noting how the colonies ‘defined the scope of political community and the role of economics in newer assertions of modern sovereignty’ (304). Charles Walton’s considered essay sketches out a new theory of club radicalisation by emphasising the significance of the ‘weak state’ (367). Some contributions reflect directly on important new work. Simon Burrows’ overview of scholarship on the connections between Enlightenment and Revolution draws on fresh research in the archives of the *Société typographique de Neuchâtel* to further complicate the connections between reading and politicisation. Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire’s superb essay on the *cahiers de doléances* illustrates the complex possible readings of the documents, but it

also points briefly to the potential role for digital history methodologies to offer new insights on a much worked over set of sources.

A number of essays apply the insights of the ‘affective turn’ or the history of emotions to the Revolution. This results in stimulating contributions from Micah Alpaugh on the deputies of the National Assembly and Marisa Linton on the Terror. In a related vein, Ronen Steinberg suggests (with qualification) how the notion of trauma might be used to think anew about the Terror. Linton’s conclusion is particularly interesting, for it is emblematic of the book as a whole and it is worth quoting her closing comments for this reason: ‘In place of the monolithic explanations of the past we are seeing the development of multiple lines of investigation: ideological, political, personal, and emotional. It is possible to see now that the reasons for the Terror were far less coherent, less schematic, less purely ideological, more chaotic, and much more emotional than was once assumed’ (482). The volume closes with a series of impressive essays which tackle the legacy of the Revolution by Isser Woloch, Jeff Horn, Jennifer Ngairé Heuer and David A. Bell. Again, there is no attempt at a monolithic overarching analysis; individually and collectively these contributions emphasise instead just how complex are the legacies of the Revolution.

This collection provides an excellent overview of the current state of French Revolution scholarship. Inevitably, there are some inconsistencies. The decision, for example, not to include a ‘gender chapter’ reflects an admirable attempt to integrate the subject into the range of essays, but it probably required a more sustained engagement on the part of the authors (some do engage; many do not). Overall, however, the collection works well as an introduction to debates about the French Revolution, and presents an historiographical landscape open to new ways of thinking about these complex but defining events in modern history.

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