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THE FRENCH REVOLUTION BETWEEN BICENTENARIES

The revolution in provincial France. Aquitaine, 1789–1799. By A. Forrest. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. Pp. vi + 377. £45.

Fair shares for all. Jacobin egalitarianism in practice. By J.-P. Gross. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Pp. xv + 255. £30.

Europe under Napoleon, 1799–1815. By M. Broers. London: Edward Arnold, 1996. Pp. xii + 291. £15.99.

Reeling from the parturient labours of the bicentenary, the world of French revolutionary scholarship has lost vitality in the 1990s. Orthodoxy is back. For thirty years, a thousand fresh flowers bloomed through the cracking pavements of classical Jacobinism; but by 1989 new dominant strains had begun to establish themselves amid the rubble. It is hard to get published these days unless you write about discourse or culture, although almost any nonsense will get into print if you do. Few enough scholars, either, dare to suggest that there was anything worthwhile about what the revolutionaries were trying to do, or what they actually achieved. All this makes the books under review seem like endangered species, for they are not about what people said, but what they did; and they recognize, and do not patronize, the good faith in which it was undertaken.

One would expect little else from Jean-Pierre Gross, whose preface confines its thanks in France to members of the *Société des Etudes Robespierristes*. Jacobin classicism was not destroyed by revisionism; it was merely marginalized, and continues to find a scarcely repentant voice in that society and in the pages of its own journal, the *Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française*. Gross writes in this tradition. He represents its recent attempts to put on a more accommodating face by not attempting to explain or excuse the Terror, but to focus on what Jacobinism achieved despite it, and might have achieved without it. Terror, he maintains, was not of the essence of Jacobinism. What he calls 'mainstream' Jacobinism was the work of 'democrats, whose prime purpose was not to impose equality but to reduce inequality' (p. 1). Typical Jacobin leaders were not mountebanks like Fouché, Carrier or Javogues, but patient administrators in stormy times like Jeanbon Saint-André, Lakanal, Romme, Bo, and Roux-Fazillac. Their instincts were to seek relative equity rather than absolute equality, and they did not turn to the national razor as a way of achieving it. That may have been partly chance; they were sent to areas not riven by civil war. This gave them the opportunity to show what could be achieved without violence, and Gross's main purpose is to set out this achievement. He focuses on six main areas: the family, food-supply, land rights, taxation, employment and education. Whenever possible, he supports his arguments with statistical tables, several of which are useful contributions to knowledge. For the most part the territory he traverses is familiar enough. It is that of the famous *anticipations*, which for classical Jacobin historians made the horrors of the Year II worthwhile. In the welfare and educational provisions of the 1793 constitution, in price controls and rationing of staples, in progressive taxation, and in the tentative land redistribution of the laws of Ventôse, they saw the first stirrings of socialism. The response of sceptics, and those unmoved by this prospect, was to point out how little was

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achieved by these grandiose plans; and sometimes to question whether much was seriously intended. Gross offers a modestly positive riposte to such doubts. In the provincial policies promoted by his 'mainstream' Jacobins there is some evidence of an advance in social justice and fraternity, however fleeting. The tender roots of a 'republican way of life', and the sentiments of fairness assumed to go with it, were indeed established. Whether this world of good feelings and folk-dancing (it comes in at last on p. 199) was any more the mainstream of Jacobinism than the nasty and vindictive circus portrayed so vividly by the late Richard Cobb will be a matter for debate; but the point is fairly made that some Jacobins at least, even in 1793–4, remained committed to promoting revolutionary ideals by persuasion, consensus and conciliation and were, perhaps, beginning to achieve something that way.

The odds against success were enormous with or without the guillotine. The revolution had ruined too many people's lives, at every level of society, for many of them to co-operate with patriotic enthusiasm in further social and cultural engineering. By 1793 whole provinces were in open revolt, and in some it took a good deal more than moderation and *bals populaires* to make the Jacobin republic acceptable. The south-west was one such area, and the turmoil it went through is vividly depicted by Alan Forrest. Originally written for a French multi-volume bicentennial history of the revolution in the provinces, his book made its appearance in English when the original project collapsed from commemoration fatigue. As with the collapse of Bordeaux trade in the 1790s, foreigners are the beneficiaries, because nothing comparable has been available before in English. Already the leading authority on revolutionary Bordeaux, Professor Forrest now extends his reach to the whole region from La Rochelle to the Pyrenees to show how diverse was the impact of the great upheaval. The south-west was not, compared with areas to its immediate north and south-east, a region of political extremism, perhaps because it had never been religiously extreme either. Consequently it accepted the early reforms without much rancour. What alienated Aquitaine was the war, which sacrificed the trade of Bordeaux, Bayonne and La Rochelle to the British, turned the Pyrenees into a threatening military frontier, and brought conscription of able-bodied peasantry to fight in distant Belgium and Germany. Already by 1793 all the Gascons wanted was to be left alone and in peace, but what they got was a whole generation of disrupted trade, and increasingly unavoidable military service. If the bloody punishment of the Gironde's half-hearted federalist revolt taught them that it was better to endure than to erupt, hatred of the Corsican warmonger overflowed as the British marched up from Spain in 1814, and Bordeaux ran up the white flag, not of surrender, but of the Bourbons.

Although that moment ends the book, Forrest does not devote much space to the years between 1794 and 1814. One suspects that, like Gross, his real interest comes to an end with Thermidor, and the period after is only really worth looking at as a mirror for lost promise. Though one of Richard Cobb's most loyal disciples, he has always had a soft spot for the aims of the Jacobin republic that Gross, who indeed cites his work a couple of times with approval, would happily share. Thus it is left to yet another of Cobb's pupils to tell us how far Aquitaine's experience after 1794 was typical. Napoleon's regime might not have represented the revolution from a Jacobin perspective forged in the Year II, but for most of the peoples of Europe, as Michael Broers makes clear, he remained the revolution incarnate until his downfall. That was largely because his rule represented the Enlightenment in action. Broers makes a better case than ever before for Napoleon as enlightened despot, ruling through an administrative elite whose members saw the empire as a laboratory of efficient

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government. Now that the revolution had swept away all the obstacles bemoaned by the *Philosophes*, France, and soon much of Europe, could be ruled according to the sovereign criterion of utility. The men who rallied to Napoleon all over the continent, and served his purposes most willingly, had a truly enlightened contempt for ignorance, bigotry, superstition and timeless routines. They were proud to ride roughshod over popular and particularist prejudices. No wonder the people of Europe hated them. To their French compatriots they represented rationalization, taxation, and conscription. To the peoples and elites alike of Belgium, Italy and much of Germany they represented both foreign domination and all too much of what their own modernizing rulers had been attempting even before the revolution in France. The Europe-wide revolts against Napoleon, as overstrain shook his system to pieces between 1808 and 1814, were not, Broers argues, an awakening of nations longing to form modern states of their own. They were a rejection of states of all sorts by ordinary people profoundly tired of being pushed around. Their protests were not fruitless. They helped to bring Napoleon down, and with him his uneasy superstate, but they failed to reverse any of the other trends that he embodied, and failed utterly to push back the frontiers of power in any of the lesser states that he left behind – France included.

Broers' evident sympathy for the ordinary sufferers from Napoleonic rule marks out the true pupil of Cobb, who might have been less shocked by the book's fulsome dedication than its author fears. Cobb would certainly have welcomed Broers' determination to resist the allure of Napoleon himself. As the bicentenary of Brumaire approaches, we can doubtless look forward to an explosion of repetitious and unoriginal rehearsals of the Napoleonic epic. But although he admits to a fascination for that amazing and repellent man, Broers resolutely refuses to let Boney dominate the stage as he always demanded. He refuses to let France dominate the scene either. Trained through research on Napoleonic Italy, he has written a book about the whole of Europe ruled directly or indirectly from imperial Paris. The result is one of the most original surveys of this period in recent times. Brimming with well-researched regional details, enriched with splendid quotations, with sharp insights and judgements on every page (and in particular in a stunning final chapter), it largely shuns the world of battles and eagles to explore what this high drama meant for ordinary people. The world of revolutionary historiography may well have lost some of its old vitality. What Broers shows is that there is plenty of scope for it in a period condemned for too long by all but military buffs as a boring and monotonous postscript.

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