

---

*H-France Review* Vol. 13 (July 2013), No. 105

Gilles Feyel. *Dictionnaire de la presse française pendant la Révolution 1789-1799. La Presse départementale T. II*. Ferney-Voltaire: Centre International d'Étude du XVIIIe Siècle, 2012. xi + 388 pp. €180.00 (cl). ISBN 978-2-84559-071-7.

Review by Jeremy D. Popkin, University of Kentucky.

The *Dictionnaire de la presse française pendant la Révolution* is a scholarly reference work, a contribution to the history of the revolutionary era in the French provinces, and a true labor of love. Edited by Gilles Feyel, the long-time director of the Institut français de presse at the Université de Paris-II and author of a massively detailed study of the eighteenth-century French provincial *affiches*, the *Dictionnaire* aims to provide detailed entries for every known periodical published in the French *départements* outside of Paris during the revolutionary decade.[1] The first of five planned volumes appeared in 2005, covering the regions of Normandy, Lorraine, Alsace, and the Limousin, as well as the departments of the Rhône-et-Loire, Ain and Isère. This present volume includes four of France's present-day regions: Nord-Pas-de-Calais, Picardie, Champagne-Ardenne, and Auvergne, comprising thirteen departments in all.

In contrast to the well-known catalogue of the Bibliothèque nationale's newspaper collection, familiarly known to scholars as "Martin et Walter," which provides little more than strictly bibliographic information about the journals listed, the notices in the *Dictionnaire* are veritable mini-monographs, some of them running to more than twenty double-column pages of small type.[2] Each notice provides information under twenty standardized rubrics, beginning with the publication's title or titles (since most revolutionary newspapers changed their names at least once during their existence) and including not only such basic matters as date and place of publication and names of owners, editors and printers, but also figures for print runs (if known), price of subscriptions, format, typographical appearance, political tendencies, location of surviving collections, archival sources concerning the paper, and previous studies of it.

To compile this data, the contributors, who include such prominent figures as Hervé Leuwers (for the Nord-Pas-de-Calais) and Philippe Bourdin (for the Auvergne), have had to invest considerable effort. Surviving collections of provincial newspapers from the revolutionary period are rarely complete. In some cases, titles are known only from archival evidence or reprints of articles in other publications. Existing studies of these newspapers and their personnel are equally hard to track down, often having appeared in obscure local history journals.[3] Even the shortest entries in the *Dictionnaire* are triumphs of dedicated erudition.

The *Dictionnaire* will obviously be an indispensable resource for scholars working on local history during the revolutionary era. Historians of the press will appreciate the many citations from newspaper prospectuses and editors' announcements. Specialized as its content is, however, the *Dictionnaire* merits wider attention. To read through these notices is to be taken into the heart of the revolutionary period's struggles as they were experienced on the ground by the innumerable editors and printers who feature in these articles as well as their readers. The accident of this volume's composition—articles concerning four mostly rural regions, with only a handful of major cities (Lille and Amiens being the only ones with more than 20,000 inhabitants)—means that the contributors are dealing with regions where a local

press, if it existed at all before the Revolution, inevitably had difficulty finding enough resources—investors, contributors, and readers—to make its existence financially feasible. Very few local newspapers managed to survive the political upheavals of the revolutionary era without interruptions. In the four departments of the present-day region of Auvergne, only fifteen titles appeared during the revolutionary decade, and only five of those had more than an ephemeral existence. From the end of 1792 until 1796, there were no local newspapers at all in the region. In the more populous Nord-Pas-de-Calais region, thirty-two titles have been identified, but there were at most six appearing at any one time and there was a complete turnover of enterprises between 1792 and 1794, followed by another mass extinction after Thermidor. At least in the regions covered in this volume, one cannot even claim that the revolutionary period marked the real breakthrough of the local press: in several departments, no successful local newspaper established itself until the Napoleonic period, when prefects were ordered to create a publication if none already existed.

Daunting as the prospects of success were, editors in the provinces kept trying. Gilles Feyel devotes a number of pages to the career of Jean-Charles Duménil, editor of the *Courrier du département de la Somme* in 1790–1791, “a young man, anxious to make his mark,” who struggled valiantly to keep his paper going, despite the hostility of the local authorities and the fact that he never managed to attract more than 200 subscribers. In Hervé Leuwers’s notice on the *Affiches d’Artois* we meet the widow Marchand, a feisty woman editor who spoke out on behalf of refractory priests and quarreled with Charlotte Robespierre, sister of the Incorruptible. Pâris de Lespinard, editor of the *Feuilles de Flandre*, later known as the *Gazette du département du Nord*, managed to keep up with the changing political times from 1789 to 1793, until he backed the wrong horse in a conflict between two politically engaged generals in the months after Dumouriez’s treason, a mistake that landed him in a Paris prison for most of the Terror. A systematic reading of these stories would provide much data for evaluating Lynn Hunt’s hypothesis, in her classic *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*,<sup>[4]</sup> that leadership of local Jacobin movements often came from “outsiders” more linked to national militant networks than to their local communities, men like Pierre-François-André Tubeuf, mentioned by Gilles Feyel, who seems to have had the journalistic equivalent of a brown thumb, founding unsuccessful local newspapers in a half dozen different cities.

Reading through the notices of this volume of the *Dictionnaire*, one also gets a sense of what local newspapers provided for their readers that the national papers published in Paris did not. In some cases, it was information of strictly local concern, such as the lists of *biens nationaux* for sale. Often, it was coverage of local clubs and municipal administrations, whose doings were of no interest to the national press but mattered intensely to their home towns. Jacques Bernet devotes an interesting notice to Sedan’s *Journal du Vrai Jacobin* (1794), the product of a talented team of local militants who succeeded in forging some real connections to the local textile workers until the unexpected news of 9 Thermidor threw them into confusion. The *Argus* of Valenciennes reached a circulation of over 4000, probably because it was located close to an active war front in 1793 and 1794. As Philippe Marchand concludes, “everything was done to galvanize the moral of the French troops” (p. 54). The conflict provoked by the Civil Constitution of the Clergy comes up frequently in the tales of newspapers published in 1791 and 1792, and the mention of Directory-era publications that called themselves *La Décade* or *La Décadaire* reminds us that editors still had to take sides on religious issues in the Revolution’s later years. The history of local newspapers was often entangled with that of hometown boys who had made it to the national political scene, as the story of the woman editor who provoked Charlotte Robespierre to denounce her to her brother shows. Babeuf tried unsuccessfully to publish a newspaper in Noyon—apparently no copies of its five issues survive—and the names of other national figures appear in many of these notices.

The somewhat random organization of the *Dictionnaire de la presse française*, presumably determined by which *équipes* of contributors completed their work first, makes it a bit unwieldy. The current volume covers a contiguous swath of northern territory, from the Atlantic coast to Champagne, together with

---

the Massif Central; after reading about Lille and Valenciennes, however, one needs to find a copy of volume one to track down the articles on Rouen and Havre, and we have to await the remaining three volumes for notices on the regions bordering the Auvergne. In some cases, Feyel and his contributors have clearly fallen in love with their subjects, producing articles that seem out of proportion to the importance of the titles concerned. Many American research libraries may balk at the cost of this elegantly printed volume, especially knowing that they will have to commit themselves to purchase three more equally expensive tomes. It is regrettable that so few readers are likely to have the opportunity to browse these information-laden pages, but those whose research interests include the provinces during the revolutionary era should certainly seek an opportunity to do so.

#### NOTES

[1] Gilles Feyel, *L'annonce et la nouvelle : la presse d'information en France sous l'Ancien Régime (1630-1788)* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2000).

[2] André Martin and Gérard Walter, *Catalogue de l'histoire de la Révolution française t. 5* (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale, 1943).

[3] For a brief overview of the provincial press during the Revolution, see Jeremy D. Popkin, "The Provincial Newspaper Press and Revolutionary Politics," *French Historical Studies* 18 (1993): 434-56.

[4] Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

Jeremy D. Popkin  
University of Kentucky  
([popkin@uky.edu](mailto:popkin@uky.edu))

Copyright © 2013 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172