

H-France Review Vol. 13 (February 2013), No. 24

Didier Michel, *Blondel de Nouainville: L'itinéraire d'un noble normand (1753-1793)*. Cherbourg-Octeville: Éditions Isoète, 2012. 214 pp. Maps, tables, illustrations, appendices, indices, bibliography, glossary. 23 € (pb). ISBN 978-2-35776-042-4.

Review by Edward J. Woell, Western Illinois University.

There are two dates for which Anne-Achille-Alexandre, the chevalier Blondel de Nouainville, is known and—albeit among different partisans for separate reasons—celebrated. The first is 10 May 1788, when Blondel placed himself between his troops and a volatile crowd in the Breton capital of Rennes, thereby thwarting what could have been a bloody denouement in the ongoing struggle between the province's reformist *parlementaires* and its high aristocracy. The second is 21 October 1793, the approximate date when Blondel, by then a disaffected émigré, was mortally wounded while his counterrevolutionary regiment was fighting alongside the British near Dunkerque.

Blondel's 1788 action at Rennes was significant because it helped maintain the political momentum among those who became Brittany's third-estate representatives to the Estates General, many of whom proved integral to the National Assembly's incipient formation and thus to the beginning of the Revolution. His death in the fighting of 1793, on the other hand, assured that he would enter the figurative pantheon of counterrevolutionary heroes from western France, whose sacralization in the nineteenth century generated an equally powerful impulse on the opposite side of the political spectrum.

When these two events are taken together, they pose a formidable interpretive problem: why did a liberal noble like Blondel, who intervened in the streets of Rennes in 1788 ostensibly because he did not want to see any loss of life among the supporters of reform, become a counterrevolutionary émigré less than four years later? The question appears only more perplexing when one considers that after passage of the 1790 Civil Constitution of the Clergy and the subsequent 1791 Ecclesiastical Oath requirement, Blondel protected juror priests against their detractors in perhaps the most religiously disturbed region in all of France: the southern half of the department of the Loire-Inférieure.

In this abbreviated presentation of Blondel's life, derived in large part from his *thèse* directed by Jean-Clément Martin, Didier Michel tries to make sense of the contradiction personified by Blondel. In the *avant-propos*, Michel explains that the goal of this work "is to make known to a broad audience a forgotten figure, and secondarily, to highlight how he stands out from the ordinary" (p. 8). To achieve this goal, Michel follows a conventional chronological formula. He starts with the family milieu, most notably Blondel's predecessors in the early eighteenth century. Like many of his peers, Blondel arose from a middling economic status—by no means poor but far from extremely affluent. From there Michel traces the chevalier's life from his birth in Nouainville, Normandy in 1753 to his pivotal action at Rennes in 1788. Groomed from an early age for the military, Blondel volunteered for service without official appointment in 1766 and for several years was assigned to the *Marquis de Sancé*, a vessel charged with patrolling French colonial waters. Becoming a sub-lieutenant for an infantry regiment in 1775, he mostly saw action in the Atlantic during the War of American Independence. Later, as a lieutenant in the same regiment, he and his men were assigned to Rennes, the site of growing civil unrest near the close of the Old Regime.

Michel devotes a complete chapter to events in Brittany's provincial capital in the spring of 1788. Although there is little doubt that Blondel's action was decisive on 10 May, conflicting documentation makes it difficult to reconstruct what actually happened. According to a Breton commandant, however,

“[Blondel] prohibited his soldiers from using their weapons, threw his rifle to the ground and walked alone in the middle of the seditious crowd, saying [“]my children, these soldiers do not want to harm you, I forbade them from doing so. If you want someone, kill me, but do not expose your city to a massacre that no one would be able to stop.[“] [The crowd] took him in their arms and carried him. . . . This young man is fanatical about honor; . . . (p. 61)”

Awarded the Cross of Saint-Louis for his action on that day, Blondel seemed well on his way to a distinguished military career.

The turbulence of revolutionary politics in subsequent years soon stood in his way. How Blondel reacted to the Revolution and its initial reforms is unclear. Michel explains that the correspondence to and from the Norman noble in 1789 and 1790 is cryptic on this issue, and even murkier about how his liberalism may have evolved on account of unpredictable revolutionary events. What is clear, though, is that after being stationed at Vannes in 1790 and early 1791, he and his reorganized infantry regiment were assigned to another restless community in western France—Nantes—where religious trouble was mounting on the left bank of the Loire. Blondel and his troops were specifically called on to maintain civil order and protect constitutional priests in the explosive district of Machecoul. Every indication is that Blondel performed his duties with the utmost precision and unflinching loyalty to the new regime.

Why, then, did Blondel resign from the military and emigrate to England in the spring of 1792? Despite his protection of constitutional priests, did religious considerations like the papal condemnation of the Civil Constitution turn him into a counterrevolutionary? Was France's war against Austria and Prussia, two kingdoms quick to gain the support of noble émigrés once the conflict commenced, the final straw? Or did he increasingly become disenchanted with numerous revolutionary reforms, including the abolition of the nobility or more broadly, the end of a corporative regime in which both the military and nobility held unique and privileged positions? As Michel admits in his concluding chapter, “. . . neither the documents, nor what has been written by historians, exactly say why Blondel left the military and emigrated” (p. 133).

Although such a conclusion is an admirably candid one, it cannot help but limit the historiographical value of this brief volume. The primary reason why a microhistory of one individual or group has scholarly significance is that it can tell us something about historical developments broader than the subject itself. But if a singular focus cannot answer more expansive questions—in this instance why more than a few nobles professing liberal political and religious beliefs at the outset of the Revolution became counterrevolutionaries by 1793—its contribution to current scholarship remains circumscribed.

The academic value of the work is hobbled also by the author's inelegant appeal to diverse audiences. While it is certainly commendable to design one's work for both popular and academic readerships, the task is difficult to pull off successfully. Thus, when Michel shows an illustration of “the evolution . . . of the uniform of subordinate officers in the regiment in which Blondel was sub-lieutenant,” (p. 42) consisting of three soldierly figures—identical except for variably colored lapels (black, blue, and green)—an academic reader is hard pressed to find any scholarly relevance. There are similar illustrations throughout the book (pp. 41, 101, 128), and two genealogical appendices appearing at the end also come across as an awkward attempt to be all things to all audiences.

This unhappy effort to attract multiple readerships is regrettable, in part, because it turns the products of Michel's impressive research and source work into hard-to-find diamonds in the rough. Limited

though they may be, Michel's conclusions are well grounded not only in a multi-layered historical record, but also in a thoughtful reasoning of what the documentation reveals. Accordingly, those whose research centers on the nobility before or during the Revolution may have much to gain by examining this work. One only wishes that Michel could have found a more promising strategy for presentation that did not needlessly mix the wheat with the chaff so as to make them appear of equal worth.

Edward J. Woell
Western Illinois University
EJ-Woell@wiu.edu

Copyright © 2012 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