
H-France Review Vol. 15 (June 2015), No. 80

Gilles Feyel, dir., *Dictionnaire de la presse française pendant la Révolution 1789-1799. La presse départementale, tome IV*. Ferney-Voltaire: Centre International d'Étude du XVIIIe Siècle, 2014. xi + 507 pp. €220 (cl). ISBN 978-2-84559-107-3.

Review by Jeremy Popkin, University of Kentucky.

In an age in which the 140-character tweet is becoming an increasingly common form of scholarly communication, Gilles Feyel's monumental exercise in erudition looms up like a monolith from some other universe. This, the fourth hefty volume of what is now announced as a six-volume work (earlier volumes indicated that there would be only five), continues the survey of the departmental press during the ten years from the start of the Revolution to the coup of 18 Brumaire, covering newspapers published in Aquitaine (the departments of the Dordogne, the Gironde, the Landes and the Lot-et-Garonne) and Corsica (which had only two short-lived papers). Feyel, the long-time director of the Institut d'Histoire de la presse at the Université de Paris-II (Assas), has always been known for his painstaking devotion to detail. Other volumes in the series have included contributions by a number of distinguished scholars of the revolutionary period, most of whom have presumed that the articles in a reference work should be relatively concise. This volume, however, is almost entirely the work of Feyel himself and of a collaborator, Anne de Mathan, whose passion for antiquarian research equals or exceeds his. The result is press history taken to its outermost limits, culminating in the forty-six double-column pages that the two collaborators devote to Périgueux's *Journal prophétique*, a production of the constitutional bishop and mystic Pierre Pontard, which is described almost issue by issue. If this article had been published as a stand-alone book, it would surely run over 200 pages.

As I noted in my review of volume two of the *Dictionnaire*, the work's ambition has been to provide comprehensive descriptions of every periodical publication printed in France during the Revolution, including information on each title's format, the various names under which it appeared, its periodicity, the identity of its editor, contributors, and printer, the duration of its existence, the price of subscriptions, the nature of its content, and its ideological and political orientation.[1] The articles in this volume certainly fulfill this program. In addition, they offer generous quotations from the content of the various publications, as well as the fruits of the authors' extensive archival research. Since the surviving collections of provincial newspapers are often incomplete and hard to find,[2] the *Dictionnaire* unquestionably provides valuable information about the Revolution in the provinces. Through the stories of the various papers published in Bordeaux, for example, we can follow the drama of the great port city's evolution from enthusiastic embrace of the events of 1789 to its participation in the Federalist uprising of 1793 and the resulting repression. As the authors indicate, Bordeaux's local press revived strongly under the Directory, providing material for the study of a neglected period. (Surprisingly, if these articles are to be taken as a guide, the Bordeaux press seems to have published relatively little on colonial affairs, despite the city's intimate connection with the Antilles.)

As rich as the contents of the *Dictionnaire* are, however, the reference book format poses a challenge for readers not primarily interested in "newspaper biography." To put together a picture of local politics in Bordeaux in 1797, for example, one has to find the articles devoted to the seven different titles that appeared at one point or another in that year. Since the descriptions of the papers are arranged in

alphabetical order, this requires spotting them amidst the entries for papers published in other periods of the Revolution. Inevitably, there is considerable duplication in the description of events. Matters are not helped by the fact that, in their wordy summaries of the papers' contents, the authors give the day and month of the articles they cite, but not the year, forcing the reader to flip forward and backward through the densely printed pages hunting for signposts. When all six volumes of the *Dictionnaire* are printed, there will presumably be a general index, but the rather random manner in which different geographic regions have been grouped together means that anyone wanting to compare the press of the Aquitaine region with that of neighboring areas, such as Languedoc, has no idea which other volume of the series to consult. In any event, the extraordinary price of this reference work, whose audience is bound to be very limited, means that few American libraries are likely to acquire it, and few American scholars are likely to have easy access to it.

One cannot help concluding this review with a reflection on the contrast between the resources now available to scholars who want to study the French press of the revolutionary period and those working on the newspapers published in the United States in the same era. There is no American equivalent to the *Dictionnaire de la presse française*. Anyone seeking information about the editors and printers of newspapers is condemned to a long search through scattered archives and local-history journals. The newspapers themselves, however, are easily accessible on line through any major research library, thanks to the Readex Early American Newspapers data base, which permits quick identification of available titles from any city, state, or year, keyword searches, and other possibilities. For the French press, there are several older bibliographies covering the Paris press (which is, of course, omitted from Feyel's project—one shudders to think what he and his collaborators would have produced had they tackled the more than 1000 known titles produced there), and the provincial press will have been definitively covered once the *Dictionnaire* is completed (although the extensive press production from Saint-Domingue in the period from 1789 to 1793 will apparently not be included). Despite the massive digitization of other printed sources from the revolutionary era, however, including the Bibliothèque nationale's pamphlet collection and the Archives parlementaires, French revolutionary newspapers have not been put on line in any systematic fashion. If the history of the revolutionary press, which flourished in the 1970s and 1980s, has fallen by the wayside since then, it is partly because these rich and fascinating sources remain so difficult to access. Dare we hope that the completion of the *Dictionnaire* will inspire some action to rectify this situation?

NOTES

[1] See *H-France Review* Vol. 13 (July 2013), No. 105, p. 1.

[2] One deficiency of the work is the failure to take into account newspaper collections in countries outside of France, with the exception of the holdings of the Newberry Library in Chicago. In some cases, these collections include issues of provincial papers that are not preserved in any French depositories.

Jeremy D. Popkin
University of Kentucky
popkin@uky.edu

Copyright © 2015 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