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Christopher John Murray, Ed., *Encyclopedia of Modern French Thought*. London & New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004. xxxii + 713 pp. Notes, chronology, index. \$175.00, ISBN 1-57958-384-9.

Review by Patrick H. Hutton, University of Vermont.

When I was a young scholar intent on making my way as a professional historian, I agreed to edit an historical dictionary of the Third French Republic. I embarked upon this ambitious project with certain illusions, notably my expectation that as editor of such a work, I would acquire consummate knowledge of this field of modern French history. In the end that goal eluded me. What I did gain, however, was a comprehensive grasp of current directions of research in modern French history--of who was doing what and how they were going about it. I learned a great deal about editing, and even more about tact in dealing with contributors. I succeeded in completing the project thanks to the kindness of those scholars I persuaded to write entries, begging for authors on topics about which I knew little. Because of this experience, I have always agreed to contribute to reference works when invited. I have also been keenly interested in the strategies editors have employed in composing them.

In this respect, Christopher John Murray gets high marks for the project under review. The volume is user-friendly in terms of its mechanics, and wide-ranging in terms of its subject matter. One-hundred and fifty authors have written 234 entries. Most of these scholars are British, but the cast is international, counting among its contributors Americans, Australians, Belgians, Canadians, Germans, Irish--and even a few French scholars! The majority of entries deal with individuals. But there are also a number of thematic entries. All of the entries are substantial in length--1,000 to 5,000 words, giving authors of even modest entries a chance to explicate ideas in adequate detail for their appreciation. Each biographical entry is set up to put the accent on ideas. It concentrates on an analysis of the thought of the individual, then follows with a brief biographical sketch. The appendices are practical, including lists of entries alphabetically and by theme. The volume is prefaced with a chronology of salient events, grouped under intellectual and political rubrics, and dating from the end of the nineteenth century. Even the list of contributors is helpful because it cites the entries each of them has written, not just their academic affiliations. The index highlights in bold the entries of the volume, an obvious aide to scholars found wanting in some major reference books.

In conceptualizing his project, Murray displays much insight into the potential interests of readers of such a reference work today. In one sense, it is broader than similar volumes published in the past. Older works on "French thought" tended to limit themselves to literature, philosophy, or historiography. In this volume, it is clear that French thought took place within discrete disciplines. But the venerable allegiances that distinguish disciplines from one another are not as binding as they used to be. More scholars today are open to interdisciplinary approaches. Murray's volume encourages such interchange. It brings within the reader's purview the full range of disciplines in play at the turn of the twenty-first century, including many essays dealing with history and the social sciences.

On the other hand, Murray has no desire to be encyclopedic in the old-fashioned sense of canvassing every conceivable topic. His choice of subject matter is dictated rather by current scholarly interests and directions of research. As presented in this volume, the idea of "modern" French thought has a present-minded orientation in that French intellectual life today is his primary reference for assessing what ought to be included. Nearly all of the entries deal with the twentieth century, and, among these, most deal with the significant authors and intellectual movements of the last fifty years. One could say that it

is an encyclopedia of “postmodern” French thought, though Murray avoids that term in his title because it might convey a narrower conception of the project than he intended. Murray reaches back to some writers in a more distant past to show how they are newly relevant in light of recent research interests. The spirit in which the project must have been conceived is well expressed by contributor Herman Rapaport in his observation on the changing canon of modern French literature. Many formerly obscure writers and philosophers showcased in this volume, he explains, “were very much contemporaries of those they replaced, and when they did emerge, it was as if a whole new generation of people, hitherto unnoticed, had suddenly stepped out from behind the shadows, even if many of them were already quite well established before World War II” (p. 436). As he notes, literary figures from the old canon—André Breton, André Gide, Marcel Proust, and Paul Valéry—still find a place in this volume, but they rub elbows with the celebrities of the postmodern canon, such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Paul Ricouer.

The term “French” as employed in this encyclopedia also has a strategic meaning. Think of France as a clearing house for ideas in the contemporary world. Murray has incorporated some foreign thinkers who have become central to intellectual discussion in France—the Bulgarians Julia Kristeva or Tzvetan Todorov, for example, or the Swiss Jean Starobinski. One might say that Murray is interested in how French intellectual life mediates intellectual debate worldwide. He includes entries that show foreign influences on French thought (notably by German intellectuals such as Georg Hegel, Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Nietzsche), as well as the influence of French thought abroad (especially Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and Jean-François Lyotard in the United States).

Murray’s choice of entries for his encyclopedia is trendy, but balanced and fair. One might sort the entries by type into a pyramid of three tiers. At the apex stand some very broadly conceived essays on intellectual disciplines as traditionally defined, topics such as: Anthropology, Art History, Classics, Culture, Educational Theory, Historiography, Law, Literary Theory and Criticism, Philosophy, Philosophy of Science, Poetry, Political Movements and Debates, Sociology, Theology and Religious Thought. Historians will note a series of four essays that provide a survey of the history of the modern era, with 1870 as the point of departure, and 1918, 1939, and 1968 as points of demarcation.

Beneath these lies a middle range of thematic entries. I found some of these to be the most fresh and original in their approach, drawing out the significance of recent research in cultural theory. Murray brings what were once considered marginal themes to the center of scholarly attention. Among those that caught my eye were: Body, Colonial and Post-Colonial Experience, Francophonie, French Colonial Thought, French-Jewish Intellectuals, French Thought in the United States, Humanism and Anti-Humanism, the Influence of German Thought, Intellectuals, Media, Modernism and Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, Psychoanalytic Thought, Sexuality, and Structuralism.

The base of the pyramid is comprised of a broad array of essays on individual thinkers. Some representatives of a now receding intellectual world still find a place in this volume: the old socialists such as Jean Jaurès; the old conservatives such as Maurice Barrès, Henri Massis, and Charles Maurras; celebrities of the early twentieth century, such as Julien Benda and Henri Bergson; and the existentialist favorites of the post-World War II era, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul Sartre. Some writers one would have expected to encounter in such a volume forty years ago have been weeded out such as Paul Claudel, Jean Cocteau, André Malraux, Roger Martin du Gard, Henri de Montherlant, Charles Péguy, Romain Rolland, and Jules Romains. The overwhelming majority of the individual entries deal with thinkers who are currently in fashion. Particularly useful to researchers dealing with the contemporary scene will be the entries on newcomers who, while not yet commonplace in scholarly conversation (i.e., I was not familiar with many of them), are reshaping

French thought today. There are interesting essays, for example, on sociologists such as Jean Baudrillard and Pierre Bourdieu, who have given us such insight into the media revolution and cultural politics. Feminist theorists, such as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva, not only have their own entries; they are ubiquitous in this volume for their influence in many other fields. Representatives of the proliferating discourse on sexuality, such as Gérald Hervé and Guy Hocquenghem, receive attention, as do quirky philosophers, such as Jacques Ellul, religious ethicists such as Emmanuel Levinas, theologians such as Henri de Lubac, and religious visionaries such as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. There are entries dealing with the critics of colonialism and postcolonialism (Frantz Fanon and Edouard Glissant) and with African francophone literature (Aimé Césaire, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Léopold Senghor).

Students of historiography will also find topics of interest in this volume. There are a number of entries on historiography, with particular attention to the influence of the historians of the Annales school, among them Philippe Ariès, Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, and Michel Vovelle. Possibly of greater interest in light of the slant of this volume will be those philosophers and historians who have contributed to the “rhetorical turn” that has worked its effects on history as it has on other disciplines among whom Michel de Certeau, Michel Foucault, and Paul Ricoeur are preeminent.

The merits of this volume notwithstanding, some scholars may be disappointed with the omission of many authors previously identified with modern French thought, and they may wish to challenge the project’s underlying conceptual assumption. Though billed as an encyclopedia of modern thought, it largely ignores intellectual life in the early nineteenth century, and its references to that of the Third Republic are highly selective. As a present-minded perspective on our intellectual needs, it abandons the proposition in which the modern encyclopedia was originally conceived—that it should be a compendium of accumulating useful knowledge. As Robert Darnton has showed us in his study of the eighteenth-century *Encyclopédie*, its editors Diderot and D’Alembert likened their project to the tree of knowledge, a solid trunk from which branches would continue to grow. [1] Such a conception implies a foundational base from which intellectual inquiry may proceed as scholars further their research. Their project aspired to be comprehensive, gathering together as much practical knowledge as possible and eschewing value judgments about priorities in the selection of the topics to be included. Admittedly, Murray makes no claim to be presenting data in the manner of the *Encyclopédie*, or such modern successors as the *Encyclopédie universalis* or the *Britannica*, and space and production costs certainly set limits on what he might have hoped to include in this more precisely defined project. But he tacitly rejects the notion that an encyclopedia should be read as a grand narrative of the quest for knowledge to which successive generations of scholars contribute, and so enters upon a more tendentious valuation of what the potential reader needs to know now. In other words, he cues the reader about what is worth investigating and so sacrifices the older encyclopedic ideal of a comprehensiveness that is more neutral about what readers may find of interest within its pages.

Murray’s approach, therefore, has its pros and cons. This volume is an excellent guide to current intellectual trends. What emerges from its perusal is an awareness of how much French thought has changed in recent years. But showcasing change in this way only underscores how rapidly intellectual fashions succeed one another these days. Ironically, Murray’s up-to-date packaging of his subject matter may limit its useful shelf life. It may leave too many empty places that will vex researchers who are only using this volume as a reference for reliable data as they envision intellectual horizons of their own. The strength of Murray’s volume lies in its accent on the impact of cultural theory on French intellectual life since the 1980s. But there is some sentiment among scholars today that the “golden age of theory” is already behind us. For that reason, a title suited to what the volume actually surveys—say “postmodern,” or “late modern” or “contemporary” French thought—might have been more appropriate. The term

“modern,” after all, is identified with ideas that we can trace to the era of the Enlightenment, and even before.

Whatever merits such objections might have, Murray’s volume shows us that French intellectual life remains a lively stage that continues to hold the attention of scholars around the world, even if France has a diminished place in global politics today. Murray’s choice of entries helps us to understand why.

NOTES

[1] Robert Darnton, “Philosophers Trim the Tree of Knowledge,” in *The Great Cat Massacre* (New York: Random House, 1985), 194–95, 210.

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