

H-France Review Vol. 8 (September 2008), No. 116

David Lawday, *Napoleon's Master: A Life of Prince Talleyrand*. New York: Thomas Dunne Books, St. Martin's Press, 2007. 386 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, index. \$26.95 U.S. (cl.). ISBN 0-312-37297-3.

Review by William Olejniczak, College of Charleston.

David Lawday has penned an immensely readable and captivating account of Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Perigord. Lawday is an Oxford-educated former American correspondent for *The Economist* who has more recently written for the *New Statesman*. Intended for a general Anglo-American audience, this book wears its scholarship lightly. Lawday developed a personal interest in Talleyrand after coming across several biographies by chance while living in Berlin in the 1990s. Since then he has gathered materials in archives in Paris, London, and Washington, D.C., mined the resources in the Talleyrand homes, and read Talleyrand's memoirs and extensive correspondence along with the usual memoirs of his contemporaries. The book is advertised as the first full-scale biography of Talleyrand in a generation. What we have is a splendidly written narrative that the author acknowledges breaks little new ground.

Leaving aside the question of the need for another book on Talleyrand, Lawday states that he was drawn to the extraordinary sixty-year public career of Talleyrand, the "supreme performer" who lived dangerously and mastered the technique of playing the game but never giving the game away (pp. 2-3). He accepts that Talleyrand had many personal shortcomings but finds more to admire, including his eccentricities of sleeping late, retiring late, playing whist, overdosing in scent, and inhaling and snorting beakers of water to avoid head colds. In this book Talleyrand is a cosmopolitan internationalist, a benign colonizer, an Anglophile, and the chief architect of the cessation of conflict between Britain and France, those "hereditary enemies" who because of Talleyrand "have never again warred against each other." He believed in the "natural frontiers" of France, abhorred conquest, defended "civilized values" and was an "enthusiastic student of economics, a new science that will stand behind every major policy he is to follow" (pp. 4-6). Frequently taciturn, he chose the *mot juste* rather than the *bon mot*. Talleyrand is seen as something of a forerunner to the planners of a European Union who sought to prevent large-scale wars by promoting economic cooperation based on the free exchange of goods and services within the Union (p. 3). Lawday's Talleyrand was convinced that Britain and France were the leading lights in Europe, favoring liberalism and commercial society, and secure enough to be able to work together to prevent general European wars. Lawday gratefully acknowledges previous biographers and makes considerable use of four works. Michel Poniatowski's *Talleyrand aux Etats-Unis* (1976) and Emmanuel Waresquiel's *Talleyrand, le Prince Immobilable* (2003) are cited but less frequently than Emile Dard's *Napoleon et Talleyrand* (1935) and especially Jean Orioux's *Talleyrand, le Sphinx Incompris* (1970).^[1]

These works supply significant detail as well as an overall narrative structure. At just under 350 pages, this book is more in line with Dard than with the weightier tomes of Waresquiel and Orioux. He writes approvingly of Duff Cooper's biography of 1932, the "last esteemed biography in English." (p. 7) but seems to be unaware of J.F. Bernard's massive *Talleyrand* (1973) also written in English.^[2] The book is divided into twenty one chapters and an epilogue. Lawday engagingly takes us rapidly through Talleyrand's early years. While Talleyrand experts will find themselves on very familiar turf, Lawday asserts that previous biographers have uncritically accepted Talleyrand's life-long claim that his deformed foot was the result of a careless nursemaid who dropped him in infancy. As proof, Lawday cites a recently discovered portrait of Talleyrand's first uncle depicted wearing a corrective tub-like

shoe. Talleyrand's club foot was congenital (pp. 7-8, 13-14).

Only two chapters are devoted to the first thirty-five years of Talleyrand's life. We learn about the political significance of his Perigord pedigree, his troubled childhood, his uneventful seven years of early schooling at Harcourt, and his steady rise through the clerical hierarchy with the help of his well-placed uncle, the adjutant to the Archbishop of Reims. Seminary training and degrees in theology paved the way for his successive promotions to under-deacon, canon, abbot, and vicar-general. He attained the influential post of agent-general of the clergy at the age of twenty-six. Despite his growing reputation in the public sphere as a defender of clerical privilege and his emerging talent for royal insider-politics, by 1786, Talleyrand was complaining to friends about his stalled career. Only in 1789, as the elections for the Estates-General were about to begin, did he become consecrated and land a bishopric in Autun, which he immediately parlayed into a seat at Versailles. Lawday spends slightly more than 10 percent of the book to cover these thirty-five years.

Two slightly longer chapters are devoted to the early revolutionary years. Here Lawday presents a familiar Talleyrand: liberal, reform-minded, constitutionalist, and supporter of the restructuring of the church. In early 1792, Talleyrand entered the foreign ministry for the first time and was sent on a brief mission to London to persuade the British to remain neutral. A few months later he returned to a radicalized Paris and anxiously applied for a passport to London, which Danton probably secured for him. The Alien Bill forced him out of Britain in early 1794, and he reluctantly headed for the United States. Managing during his entire exile to avoid the emigre label, Talleyrand, with the aid of Madam de Stael, returned to France in 1796 without incident and re-established himself in the world of foreign affairs in 1797 at the age of forty three.

In chapter six, Lawday arrives at the book's theme. In December 1797, Talleyrand met Bonaparte for the first time and began his "perverse and addictive" relationship with him. (p. 7). The usual questions are appropriately, if intermittently, raised over the course of the next thirteen chapters. Was Talleyrand treasonous? Hypocritical? Self-delusional? Principled in his commitment to France regardless of regime? Did his appetite for wealth and titles cloud his judgment? Linked to these time-worn questions is the more provocative one of who mastered whom. The book title certainly implies that Talleyrand mastered Napoleon. In thirteen scintillating chapters Lawday regrettably never systematically analyzes this proposition. To be sure, Lawday does take up and assess the important encounters between the two, but they are treated as discrete events, leaving readers to sort out the larger question for themselves.[3]

The last two chapters tangentially connect to the book's theme, but Lawday skillfully weaves his way through Talleyrand's remaining two decades of life. Lawday recounts Talleyrand's influential role in the Chamber of Peers during the Bourbons and his support for the Orleanists in 1830. Talleyrand's last public performance was as foreign minister yet again on mission to London to negotiate the creation of the state of Belgium. He signed a statement of repentance for his churchly transgressions and expressed unbroken personal loyalty to the pope one hour before he died.

What was the nature of the Talleyrand-Bonaparte relationship? For Lawday, [It] was an "epic struggle," (p. 3) "extremely complex," (p. 6) and "mutually faithless" (p. 5). The book's title implies that Talleyrand held the upper hand but the evidence to support the claim is ambiguous. In areas where there was agreement, this question did not arise. For example, both favored an invasion of Egypt (p. 108), planned the coup of 1799 (pp. 118-19) and saw a justification for an invasion of Spain (190-91). Despite Talleyrand's special pleading much later, he favored the arrest and raised no objection to the decision to execute the Duc d'Enghien (pp. 145-47).

Lawday admits that Talleyrand remained captivated by Napoleon for many years. From their first meeting in 1797, Talleyrand was "enchanted" (p. 96). Even after personally observing the carnage after

Austerlitz he was “aglow with admiration” (p. 164). At the same time, on key decisions, Napoleon clearly held the upper hand. For example, Napoleon took the title of emperor despite Talleyrand’s argument for a kingship (p. 147). During the Consulate, he kept a direct hand in the details of various armistices, truces, and treaties (p. 126), dismissed Talleyrand’s “peace plan” (the Strasbourg memorandum) after the victory at Austerlitz (p. 163-64), and kept Talleyrand completely out of negotiations with Austria after Wagram (p. 216). In 1813, Napoleon again rebuffed his call for negotiations (p. 242). Talleyrand’s mastery of diplomacy was on display at the Paris peace treaty and the Congress of Vienna, but Napoleon was present at neither conference.

Talleyrand’s vanity and well-known appetite for wealth and titles, moreover, seriously compromised his claim of independence. Even as Napoleon denied Talleyrand several offices that he coveted, including finance minister and arch-chancellor, “Napoleon’s master” gladly accepted the lesser posts of imperial grand chamberlain in 1804 (p. 149) and vice grand elector in 1807 (p. 184) as well as the bauble of a papal statelet and title of prince of Benevento in 1806 (p. 167). Napoleon’s largesse included Parisian grand mansions, a magnificent chateau at Valencay, and a financial bailout in 1811 (p. 228-29).

Contrasting, as Lawday does, a peace-loving Talleyrand with the warlike Napoleon is also problematic. Lawday’s evidence shows an aggressive Talleyrand on Egypt and Spain who also favored Austrian expansion into the Balkans in 1805 at the expense of Russia (p. 160). On this last point Lawday asserts that Talleyrand’s Strasbourg memorandum to Napoleon, composed in October 1805, showed his willingness to seek peace in Europe. Scholars such as Paul Schroeder, however, present a different Talleyrand whose same memorandum demanded the expulsion of Austria from Italy and Germany, offered nothing to Britain, and would have pushed Austria into a confrontation with Russia in the Balkans. Maybe this was not the naked aggression of Napoleon, but it was hardly a long-term plan for peace and stability. Similarly, Talleyrand assisted Napoleon in creating a Rheinbund of pro-French south German states and taking a hard line on Saxony that painted Prussia into a corner in 1806. It is also difficult to square Lawday’s claim that Talleyrand wanted peace with Britain with his bellicose speeches and reports against Britain in 1798 (p. 113). Schroeder finds Talleyrand still boasting in 1802 to the British ambassador that France would soon recover Egypt and evidence of his anti-British attitude can be seen through 1805 and the battle of Austerlitz.[4]

This eminently readable book will likely draw a substantial Anglo-American readership, but what will readers take away? Lawday did not intend to write a “history of the times” (p. 7) nor a “history of revolution and war” (p. 6). So it is not surprising that personal detail, intrigue, and pertinent anecdotes often take priority over the structural or institutional. Lawday is much more knowledgeable and interested in Talleyrand’s carriage rides and the meals at his dinner table than he is in the nature of the Napoleonic state or the French economy. Five years of Talleyrand’s work as agent-general for the clergy merit three pages as does Talleyrand’s rivalry with Gouverneur Morris for the affection of Adelaide de Flahaut. The collapse of the old regime from 1786 to 1788 is explained in two paragraphs (pp. 37-38). Lawday’s relative unfamiliarity with the scholarly literature is apparent in his recommendations for further reading. For the salons it is Roger Picard and Serge Grant.[5] The Revolution receives greater treatment, but readers will come away innocent of any recent historiography. Michelet is recommended for the history of the revolution; a worthy choice but hardly the last word. Every important historian of the Old Regime and Revolution of the past two generations goes unmentioned in the endnotes and very short list of recommended readings. For Napoleon, Jean Tulard and Vincent Cronin are noted but sparingly used; all other major Napoleonic scholars of the past thirty years are absent.[6] As expected, diplomacy and international relations receive substantial coverage which makes it all the more disappointing to see little use of recent scholarship on this subject, such as Paul Schroeder’s *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763-1848* (1994).[7]

Some inaccuracies and overstatements appear when the book strays too far from the master narratives set by previous biographers. Historians of France and modern Europe will be surprised to read that Old

Regime salonieres were “tigerish” and “lubricious” (p. 28), that Sieyes was “the brains behind” the constitution of 1791 (p. 114), that by 1803 “much of the [French] nation had turned away from religion” (p. 131), that Napoleon’s Civil Code instituted public education “open to the masses” (p. 129), that free trade was a “firm English principle” by the 1780s (p. 32), that most statesmen of the age were “fairly straightforward nationalists” (p. 116), and that Tsar Alexander had a preconceived plan in 1812 which involved “sucking the Grand Army into Russia’s heartland.” (p. 239).

Despite these shortcomings this book will certainly entertain its audience. Might it be time, however, to release Talleyrand from his biographical straightjacket? Future Talleyrand biographers might profit, for example, from the framework developed by Isser Woloch in his insightful *Napoleon and His Collaborators*. Using Woloch, Talleyrand can be placed alongside other leading “collaborators” in Napoleon’s regime. This perspective might provide a fresh examination of a Talleyrand set among his peers that still takes advantage of the voluminous primary sources available without falling into the conventional “life and times” approach. Woloch asks central questions such as what kinds of contributions did key collaborators make to the Napoleonic regime, what did they receive in return, and how did they sustain their commitment as Napoleon’s ambitions expanded beyond reason and as public liberty eroded?[8] While such an approach might not make Talleyrand any less inscrutable, it would at least bring him into the behavioral orbit of a group of insiders who came out of the Revolution and faced some of the same concerns and events.

Another fruitful line of inquiry raised by Woloch is the question of loyalty, which every Talleyrand biographer feels obligated to address. Albert Hirschman’s concepts of “exit” and “voice” are employed to analyze the question of political choice. Collaborators in an evolving dictatorship such as Napoleon’s had several options which carried various rewards and personal risks: unconditional loyalty, principled criticism in office, or resignation. Except for Talleyrand, none of Napoleon’s chief collaborators chose to resign. Talleyrand did resign in 1807 which Lawday interprets positively on the grounds that Napoleon was at his imperial height; Talleyrand did not quit when Napoleon was down (p. 183). Woloch’s approach, however, demonstrates the value of pulling Talleyrand into a larger cohort by problematizing the resignation, noting that Talleyrand’s exit was neither painful nor public thus reducing its overall effect as a critique.[9]

NOTES

[1] Emile Dard, *Napoleon and Talleyrand* (London: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1937); Emmanuel de Warresquiél, *Talleyrand, le prince immobile* (Paris: Fayard, 2003); Jean Orieux, *Talleyrand; ou Le sphinx incompris* (Paris: Flammarion, 1974); Michel Poniatowski, *Talleyrand aux Etats-Unis 1794-1796* (Paris: Librairie Académique, 1976).

[2] Bernard, *Talleyrand, A Biography* (New York: Putnam, 1973) and Duff Cooper, *Talleyrand* (London: Arrow Books, 1932)

[3] An example of a clearly focused analysis of the relationship between Talleyrand and Napoleon can be found in chapter four in Crane Brinton, *The Lives of Talleyrand* (New York: W. W. Norton Press, 1936).

[4] Paul W. Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics 1763-1848* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 276-82, 302-04, 231, 289.

[5] Roger Picard, *Les Salons littéraires et la société française, 1610-1789* (New York: Brentano’s, 1943); I was unable to locate a reference for Serge Grant.

[6] I assume that Lawday is referring to Victor Cronin, *Napoleon* (New York: Morrow, 1972) and Jean

Tulard, *Napoleon: ou Le Mythe du Saviour* (Paris: Fayard, 1977).

[7] Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics 1763-1848*

[8] I have transcribed these questions directly from the preface. Isser Woloch, *Napoleon and His Collaborators: The Making of a Dictatorship* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), p. xiv.

[9] Woloch, *Napoleon and His Collaborators*, pp. 238-40.

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ISSN 1553-9172