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H-France Forum, Volume 3, Issue 2 (Spring 2008), No. 2

Joseph Clarke, *Commemorating the Dead in Revolutionary France: Revolution and Remembrance, 1789-1799*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. x + 306 pp. List of Illustrations, index, bibliography, \$99.00 US (hb). ISBN 978-0-521-87850-0.

Review essay by Marisa Linton, Kingston University.

The French Revolution readily lends itself to a book commemorating the dead, for it certainly had more than its fair share of dramatic fatalities and lugubrious ceremonies. As Clarke repeatedly shows, “the dead had a part to play in revolutionary politics” (p. 277). In his revised doctoral thesis, he reminds us of this with some grim tales. We hear, for example that when Lepeletier became a revolutionary “martyr” after he was assassinated for voting for the death of the king, his body was exposed for three days and nights on a bier in the Place Vendôme, displaying to curious onlookers the stab wound that killed him (p. 155). Not all deaths caused by the Revolution were so gruesome. Clarke begins his account with the story of Jean-Denis Blanc, a deputy of the Third Estate, who reportedly “died of joy” amidst the dramatic scenes on 15 July 1789 when Louis XVI came to the National Assembly and announced his intention to cooperate with the Revolution. Blanc’s body was taken home to Besançon for burial, where huge crowds turned out to pay homage to his patriotism and to weep at the moving spectacle (pp. 1-2). What such deaths had in common was the political dimension. Both men, and many of the others in Clarke’s book, were deemed to have died for the *patrie*. Therefore the public rituals surrounding their death and burial were reflections of revolutionary politics. They became revolutionary “heroes”, even, in some cases, “martyrs”, their deaths enlisted in the cause of furthering the Revolution. Their lives were transfigured. They were deemed to have been men of virtue: stainless, peerless, and dedicated to the public good. The subject is a fascinating one that has attracted a good deal of attention in the last decade or so with the rise of cultural history and attendant theory. Clarke’s treatment of it is frustratingly mixed in that it is very short on the sort of historiographical and cultural discussion to be expected of a book in a Cambridge series on cultural history.

There is a wealth of material here on commemoration. One of the book’s strengths is the attention that it pays to the impact of death upon the living. Another positive aspect is provided by Clarke’s determination to go beyond official policy and the political leadership. He introduces us to many obscure and humble figures and pays particular attention to widows and the families of the deceased. Chapter two “Piety and Patriotism”, is largely concerned with the “vainqueurs” of the Bastille and examines questions about how their actions should be commemorated. Clarke charts in detail the shifts in the ways in which the “vainqueurs” were treated and reflects on how this indicates changing attitudes towards the Revolution itself. It is a pity that the important work of Lüsebrink and Reichardt is not used because it might have offered an insight into the problematic question of how to commemorate the violence that accompanied the taking of the Bastille.[1]

Most of the book deals with how the revolutionaries used funerary and commemorative rituals to construct posthumous heroes for the Revolution. There are several chapters on the setting up

of the Panthéon as a final resting place for great men of the *patrie* and on the politics whereby men were chosen – and sometimes subsequently ousted. Some of the ritual commemorations of leading figures who feature here, notably Mirabeau, Voltaire, Rousseau, Lepeletier and Marat, and the politics of the “panthéonisation” of revolutionary heroes have already been treated at length by other historians (including Jourdan, de Baeque, Ben-Amos, Hunter, Bonnet and Guilhamou).<sup>[2]</sup> I for one would have liked Clarke to have engaged more closely with the work of these historians and to have been more explicit about how and what he feels he is adding to our knowledge of these events.

Where Clarke scores more highly is in his attention to the persistence of Catholic belief and attachment to Catholic rituals in the minds of ordinary people. He argues that the increasingly secular commemoration of the dead sat uneasily in the minds of the onlookers. They clung to their beliefs, particularly where the deaths of their own loved ones were involved. Symbols and rituals invoking such themes as reason or classical antiquity were no substitute for the familiar and venerable funeral rites of the Catholic church. Clarke claims that even amongst the sans-culottes, who provided the spearhead of ferocious anti-clericalism and whose devotion both to Marat and to the Revolution was not in doubt, there was still a vestigial attachment to Christianity. Their religious beliefs were simple and unsophisticated, but nonetheless important to them. He argues that they understood such terms as “martyrdom” and “immortality” in a literal sense that had many echoes of Catholic meaning. Historians are wrong “to conflate the visceral anticlericalism of the streets with the more considered irreligion of the elite” (p. 193). The Jacobins were uneasy about the religious elements of popular belief in “Saint Marat”, and this is one reason why they eventually curtailed celebrations of the cult of Marat.

Clarke’s work is partly a lament for the loss of Catholic ritual and its traumatic effects on ordinary people who were unable to obtain the comfort of Catholic rites in the funeral ceremonies for their loved ones. For them the Revolution was about loss. Clarke’s conclusion points towards the nineteenth-century revival of Christian piety as evidence of the failure of the revolutionaries’ attempt to set up secular rituals of death and burial. He sees this as a consequence of popular rejection of these secular values. This makes it all the more frustrating that he does not engage with Ben-Amos’s work on republican secular funerals in France from 1789 to 1996 beyond brief mentions in the Introduction. Ben-Amos’s book is not included in Clarke’s bibliography, and the footnote providing details of the book wrongly gives the dates Ben-Amos covers as 1789 to 1799, which suggests that it did not figure much in Clarke’s research (p. 4). Yet Ben-Amos’s work is very relevant to Clarke’s argument, for it shows that the revolutionary funerals were resilient and popular and that they continued and grew into the nineteenth century, reaching their height with the massive secular state funerals of the Third Republic. Clarke briefly takes this point up in his Introduction, stating that Ben-Amos discounts the continuing importance of religion (p. 7). Again, it would have been interesting to see Clarke return to Ben-Amos’s arguments – and indeed those of other historians of memory and culture – more strongly in his conclusion and to consider in greater depth how his own findings might change how we understand the historiography of revolutionary commemoration of the dead and its legacy into the nineteenth century.

Death was integral to the Revolution, not only because the Revolution caused the deaths of so many people, but also because death was central to revolutionary rhetoric – a preoccupation epitomised by the ominous phrase: “la liberté ou la mort.”<sup>[3]</sup> Clarke’s book has comparatively little to say about death itself. There are several historians whose work on the politics of death in the Revolution – how death was understood and explained in terms of political ideology – might have helped Clarke to conceptualise his subject more fully in terms of its political language and ideology. One of the most notable of these omissions is *La Révolution et la mort*, a work that began as a bicentenary colloquium. It contains discussion of several topics that would

have been relevant to Clarke's work, including revolutionary "immortality", heroism, political martyrdom, and funerary music and architecture.[4] The work of both Higonnet and Merrick on revolutionary suicide could have added another dimension to Clarke's considerations of revolutionary heroism and martyrdom.[5] One of Antoine de Baecque's books figures in the bibliography, but not his most relevant work for this subject: *Septes morts sous la terreur* (translated as *Glory and Terror: Seven Deaths under the French Revolution*), which includes chapters on Mirabeau and Voltaire (both discussed at length by Clarke). De Baecque's work, with its emphasis on the cultural use of the imagery of the dead body, is not to everyone's taste, but no one could deny the originality of his approach, and it would have been good to have seen Clarke's take on this.

Clarke tells us that the Panthéon was "dedicated to a timeless conception of civic virtue" (p. 139). Eighteenth-century and revolutionary conceptions of political virtue are clearly at the heart of decisions about whom to honour as "great men of the *patrie*". Although Clarke repeatedly refers to such terms as "virtue" and "*patrie*", he does not offer us a consideration of what these terms meant to people at the time, their origins and the reasons for their significance. Clarke is curiously dismissive of the influence of antiquity on the rites of death and the creation of posthumous "heroes" of the republic. Chapter one, entitled "Virtue in action", which deals with the pre-revolutionary period, only mentions classical antiquity in passing (p. 37). His justification seems to be that classical antiquity meant little to the lower orders, as they had not been exposed to that sort of education. But of course, the men who devised revolutionary rituals and commemoration were overwhelming from the social groups that had received a secondary education and, consequently, were steeped in the world of the ancients, making deeper discussion highly pertinent. As much work has shown, belief in virtue in the eighteenth century owed a great deal to the ancients, and this mindset was taken up by the revolutionary generation.[6] The concept of natural virtue that developed from the mid-century was also to feed into revolutionary symbols and ritual. Virtue and nature were of course not necessarily secular, as indeed Clarke recognises with a discussion of Fauchet's religious beliefs. Clarke describes how the adoption of nature found its expression in the rejection by many revolutionaries of the Panthéon and their preference for natural open air places and gardens for the commemoration of virtuous heroes. The veneration of nature was therefore another aspect of the politics of virtue, but Clarke does not deal with this as a concept.

One historiographical issue with which Clarke does engage strongly is that of the history of the emotions. He argues that Ben-Amos, Agulhon, Gildea, Bonnet and the contributors to Nora's *Les Lieux de mémoire* invariably dwell on politics and the elite, at the expense of people in private life. He seeks to redress this balance. Death, he says, is about "genuine human emotions", about mourning, loss and sorrow (pp. 4-6). This aim finds expression in the different ways in which he discusses the politicians themselves and the impact of their policies on the rest of the population. His tone fluctuates between the gleefully cynical (which he uses when describing the revolutionary leaders' orchestration of funerary rituals to further their own political ends) and the sympathetic way in which he speaks of the ordinary people who were deprived of the recourse to traditional Catholic funerary rituals by the manipulation of revolutionary politicians. Several of the six chapters are focused on the commemoration of the great men of the Revolution and in that sense cover well trodden ground. At times however, when considering the "vainqueurs" and the widows of revolutionary soldiers, Clarke's approach recalls that of the English historian, Richard Cobb, who looked at the Revolution very much from the experience of the "little man" for whom the Revolution was a calamity that descended upon him from outside, often in the shape of "a man on a horse". There may well be a lot of truth in this argument. Part of the difficulty though is proving it. How can one tell what ordinary people felt, especially during the period of the Terror when it became positively dangerous to challenge the official line of the Jacobins? To answer this question Cobb paid unrivalled attention to local

and popular materials. Clarke's sources are, for the most part, printed accounts: debates in the clubs and assemblies, newspapers, pamphlets. Much of the focus is necessarily on Paris. Had he made more extensive use of regional archival sources a clearer picture might have emerged. As it is, he cites some intriguing material, particularly on the provincial reception of the cult of Marat, such as an account of a mock funeral held for Marat in Rennes on 18 July 1793. The inversion of Jacobin ritual involved many elements of a charivari, with "a hearse decorated with pigs' bladders and broken buckets, a convoy of laughing choir boys" and "a garish effigy of Marat" which was sent up in flames amidst roars of appreciation from the crowd and imprecations in defiance of the Jacobins (p. 197). A greater attention to such material would have been beneficial as would some investigation of this early use of charivari in a political sense.

One of the most intriguing and original parts of the book is the concluding chapter on the period after Thermidor and the Directory. Here Clarke examines the treatment of dependents of soldiers who had died for the *patrie*. This perspective goes beyond the official politics of commemorating heroes, for it considers how far the successive revolutionary regimes were prepared to put their ideals into practice and offer financial help to the many widows and orphans left vulnerable by the loss of their men folk. Here, for the first time in his book, Clarke offers a much more positive assessment of the Jacobins. Under their rule there was a genuine commitment to giving significant sums to the families of dead soldiers – though as with almost everything else about the Jacobins' social policy, the intention to do good was more notable than their ability to put their ideas into practice. Indeed, for Clarke the track record of the Jacobins in this respect was much more admirable than that of the regimes that succeeded them. In his treatment of the Directory, Clarke paints a damning picture of a cynical regime that cut back even on its promises to help the families of ordinary soldiers whilst increasing the sums paid to widows of higher officers, particularly generals. Here, Clarke aligns himself against recent attempts to portray the Directory as a time of positive political achievement. His view of the Directory is much more the traditional one – of a threadbare and corrupt regime.

Clarke's main finding seems to be that, despite the efforts of the secularising revolutionary state, Catholic rituals remained important for ordinary people. To many readers this conclusion may be rather less unexpected than Clarke seems to think. Nevertheless, it will be helpful for non-French readers to have some of this primary material made available in English. More worryingly, Clarke has declined the opportunity to profit from some of the major works of historiography in this field, particularly by French and American scholars, that would have given greater interest and depth to his study. He has cited historians (or in some cases not even cited them) in what is often a perfunctory manner, without integrating their approaches into his study. He may feel that this gives more originality to his own work, but it actually makes it less interesting. Since this book appeared as part of a series in cultural history published by Cambridge University Press it seems surprising that the series editors did not encourage Clarke to engage more widely with historians and their innovative methodologies of cultural history, particularly those beyond the confines of English historiography.

## NOTES

[1] Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink and Rolf Reichardt, *The Bastille: a History of a Symbol of Despotism and Freedom* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).

[2] These works include: A.R.M. Jourdan, *Les Monuments de la Révolution 1770-1804: une histoire de la représentation* (Paris: Champion, 1997); Antoine de Baecque, *La Gloire et l'effroi: Sept morts sous la Terreur* (Paris: Grasset, 1997); Avner Ben-Amos, *Funerals, Politics, and Memory in Modern France, 1789-1996* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Donna M. Hunter,

'Swordplay: Jacques-Louis David's Painting of Le Peletier de Saint-Fargeau on his Deathbed', in James A.W. Heffernan (ed.), *Representing the French Revolution: Literature, Historiography, and Art* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1992); Jean-Claude Bonnet (ed.), *La Mort de Marat* (Paris: Flammarion, 1986); and Jacques Guilhaumou, *La Mort de Marat* (Brussels: Editions complexe, 1989).

[3] This phrase was central to the Jacobins' understanding of what they were trying to do in the Year II, a fact that Sophie Wahnich acknowledged when she made it the title of her recent book seeking to explain, even to justify, the Terror: Sophie Wahnich, *La Liberté ou la mort: essai sur la Terreur et le terrorisme* (Paris: La Fabrique editions, 2003).

[4] Elizabeth Liris and Jean Maurice Bizière (eds), *La Révolution et la mort* (Toulouse : Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 1991).

[5] These works include: Patrice Higonnet, 'Du suicide sentimental au suicide politique', in Liris and Bizière, *La Révolution et la mort*; and Jeffrey Merrick, 'Suicide and Politics in Pre-Revolutionary France', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 30 (2006): 32-47.

[6] The importance of the influence of classical antiquity on the French revolutionaries is well attested in many studies. The most comprehensive are: Harold T. Parker, *The Cult of Antiquity and the French Revolutionaries* (originally published Chicago, 1937, reprinted New York, 1965), pp. 8-36; Chantal Grell, *Le dix-huitième siècle et l'antiquité en France* (2 vols, Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1995); and the more recent, though less thorough, Claude Mossé, *L'Antiquité dans la Révolution française* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1989). George Armstrong Kelly, *Mortal Politics in Eighteenth-Century France* (Ontario: University of Waterloo Press, 1986) includes a lengthy discussion of the profound influence of classical antiquity on funerary practices in the Revolution.

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