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Ruth Harris, *Dreyfus: Politics, Emotion, and the Scandal of the Century*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2010. xvii+542 pp. Illust., notes, bibliog., index. \$35.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-312-57298-3; \$28.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN10: 0-312-57298-0

Review Essay by Julian Wright, Durham University.

British readers of this review may remember the spoof school history book *1066 and All That*, published in the 1930s, which wittily lampooned a certain U.K.-centric view of history and how it should be taught to young people. Littered with erroneous re-tellings of well-known events or myths, the reader is pointedly referred to such-and-such a happening as being a “good thing” or a “bad thing.” Thus, “Broody [sic] Mary’s reign was, however, a Bad Thing, since England is bound to be C. of E. so all the executions were wasted;” or (in case anyone needed reminding) “the battle of Waterloo... resulted in the English definitely becoming top nation. It was thus a very Good Thing;” or, again, “Gladstone was thus clearly a Good Man but a Bad Thing (or, alternatively, a Bad Man but a Good Thing).”[1]

Now I’m not sure whether anyone has ever attempted such a text for France, but the section on the Third Republic would have practically written itself: following the classic school textbook narrative, we might have “the *Affaire des Fiches* was, however, a Bad Thing, since France is bound to be laïc, so all the files were wasted;” or “the Dreyfus Affair led to the French having the top Republic in the world. It was thus a very Good Thing.” And Jaurès, Mme de Caillavet, Picquart—most of the cast of the Affair in fact—could, on Ruth Harris’ evidence, be seen as “A Good Man (or woman) but a Bad Thing (or, alternatively, a Bad Man but a Good Thing).”

Harris’ purpose in writing this stunning work of history is indisputably to take the Dreyfus Affair out of the world of simple moral judgments and to re-identify it as an episode which was, on every side and in every way, murky, complex, and riddled with dubious moral decisionmaking. Her conclusion is perhaps the strongest, most challenging of any work on the Dreyfus Affair written from the point of view of serious academic history (Vincent Duclert has emphasized recently that anti-Dreyfusard histories of the Affair do still appear, but we are dealing in this review with the realm of reputable academic history).[2] Harris sees the legacy of the Dreyfusards as often damaging and ultimately responsible for French republicanism’s official refusal to countenance pluralist identities.[3] Dreyfusard intellectual engagement, such a fundamental building-block in modern French discourse, is now shown to be far from being a “Good Thing.” Harris’ narrative shows how many of the deepest-seated problems and moral uncertainties in French political life can be traced back, not to the clash of anti-Dreyfusards and Dreyfusards, but to the triumph of the Dreyfusards themselves. When they lost their temper with Dreyfus for accepting his pardon in 1899, Clemenceau and Company were not just being unkind and inhumane, they were signing up to an abstract vision of Truth and Justice that would, by its very abstractness, become exclusive and, ultimately, exclusionist. And thus, far from seeing the roots of later problems such as the Vichy experience or the fascism of the 1930s as directly located in the writings and activity of Drumont and Déroulède, we might even see France’s relapse in the 1940s, along with subsequent worries over inclusivity and human rights, as rooted in the mental habits—if not the actual ethical decisions—of the Dreyfusards. But, as Harris says in a line that all historians of twentieth-century France should have on their doorposts, “the legacy of the Affair was ubiquitous, but it was not determining” (p. 383). Neither Dreyfusism nor anti-Dreyfusism “led inexorably” to later events. But just

as the Dreyfusards created the sense of moral courage that inspired so many righteous movements for peace or liberty, in the campaign against the Algerian War, for example, so they also laid out the mental conditions for many of France's great internal struggles.

To build this almost unthinkable connection--unthinkable because it openly defies decades of philosophical and historical reflection going back to Hannah Arendt--Harris has assembled a towering and highly distinctive scholarly base of evidence. Her studies of the mental, emotional, and spiritual preoccupations of the leading actors on both sides of the argument reveal that the public discourse of Truth and Justice was a veneer covering a far more complex and irrational world of emotional vulnerability and personal dislocation. The Dreyfus family themselves experienced the sense of loss and dislocation of Alfred's exile as an emotional shock that affected all of them, and Mathieu, so important in the Dreyfusard campaign, would himself feel "entombed, a zombie forced to live a half-life like his brother." Zola was haunted, gripped, overcome by the Affair, and his articles were written impulsively and emotionally. This might perhaps be unsurprising; but the point is that many historians have, of course, over-emphasized the intellectualism of Dreyfusard engagement at the expense of the emotional, personal reflex actions of many of the participants, and yet, as Harris reveals emphatically, this aspect is in many ways the most striking feature of the source material.

All who lived and breathed the Affair were disturbed by it, and that disturbance operated across the whole register of their personal, intellectual, ethical, religious, and filial identity. Many involved in the Affair, on both sides, found that it drew into strange worlds of spiritual or magical belief, and these byways of the imagination were in fact much closer to the daily experience of Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards than the traditional positivistic narrative of French republicanism would have us believe. The physiologist and future Nobel Prize winner Charles Richet denounced the irrationality of anti-Dreyfusism, but he himself was fascinated by the occult and hypnotism (pp. 158-60). The Paragons of Truth were just as likely as the Paladins of Military Tradition to believe in spiritual connections to the supernatural. More generally, the insistence on documentation and empirical evidence which was such a feature of Dreyfusism was often tempered with a sense of the righteousness of any cause that was opposed by Jesuits (p. 161). Indeed, Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards were equally as likely to make key decisions during the Affair because of party political concerns or because of the influence of a powerful and charming hostess.

The very issue of anti-Semitism, so starkly labeled as the enemy by Zola in December 1897, melts into a more inchoate morass of political labeling and personal squabbling on the Dreyfusard side as well as the anti-Dreyfusard.<sup>[4]</sup> The erudite Reinachs played on anti-Semitism in their own correspondence, though their private humor reflected a deeper public sense of unease about the place of Jews in French society--an unease that Harris rightly emphasizes as a fundamental strain within ethnic and religious relationships in the late nineteenth century. But the very insidiousness of anti-Semitism meant it became an influence within the very heart of the Dreyfusard campaign. None of this is to say that Harris is not absolutely clear about the extraordinary violence, prejudice, and racism of many anti-Dreyfusards--indeed she is perhaps more shocked by the violence of anti-Dreyfusard propaganda than many historians, and her work never plays down the full horror of that campaign. The full panoply of anti-Dreyfusism is laid out, including the medieval lack of restraint with which groups such as the Assumptionists played on base instincts and fears, reviving old-world mythologies such as Jewish ritual murders and black magic. Harris emphasizes the distaste of an anti-Dreyfusard Albert de Mun faced with a "déclassé" like Drumont; but once more, the personal, private sphere which she has analysed so acutely reveals, through private correspondence, a de Mun who suspects that "Drumont... has no idea, in fact, to what extent he is right" (p. 182). Harris is particularly good at explaining the subtle distinctions between different Catholic positions on the anti-Dreyfusard side, though it would have been interesting to develop the picture still further with a more prolonged investigation of Catholic Dreyfusards.

Essential in weaving this complicated and colourful picture of the habits and sentiments on both sides is Harris' subtle understanding of the bonds of family and friendship and the pulls of career rivalry or struggles to develop professional reputation. She is especially strong on the role of women behind the scenes, remarking boldly that one of the difficulties for the Dreyfusards at the Rennes re-trial was that the salonnieres were not present to pull together their supporters and disciples and give the campaign great cohesion. Mme Straus, Mme de Caillavet, Gyp, and the Marquise Arconati-Visconti are painted clearly and their role examined systematically. Indeed, this particular chapter is slightly less colourful than one might have expected; many accounts of a character such as Arconati-Visconti have gone much further in emphasizing her mercurial manner and her ruthless control of conversation at the dinner table. Because Harris' history is so alive to the nuances of daily experience and emotional responses, we can almost take this chapter as evidence that she is attempting to build up the salonnieres into a role which can be assessed more coldly and carefully by historians, avoiding the caricatures that prevail.

The basis for Harris' penetrating insights into the relationships that produced the complex twists and turns of the Affair is her huge mastery of the private correspondence of many of the main protagonists. This book is a distillation of a corpus of material that is exceptionally rich and which has led her to study thousands of letters, as well, of course, as the copious memoir literature published by first-hand witnesses and participants. But her whole approach means that the later reconstructions of participants, and indeed much of their journalism at the time, weigh more lightly in her narrative than the personal exchanges between individuals. This too is important for the historiography of the Dreyfus Affair. Not that Harris is the first to pay attention to letters, of course, but many historians, especially in France, have started with an approach controlled and defined by received wisdom that has been set in stone through the authority of major figures' recollections, in turn established in their own contributions to newspapers at the time. Harris understands the role of the press as fundamental to the Affair, but it is *because* she sees the press as an active participant that she seeks to go beyond the lines laid out in journalism by privileging private and intimate correspondence over the public proclamations in the newspapers. Indeed, this book is remarkable for challenging the classic idea of authority in mainstream modern French historiography. Reading the private letters of Barrès and Soury, or Reinach and Labori, may seem obvious—and yet so few have taken the trouble to set out their interpretative framework in such a way that the systematic and dedicated study of these correspondences has become the backbone of the historical enterprise. It is not simply that “personality, friendship, love, hate and above all fear were key elements;” Harris' approach has drawn us into a discussion about France that is far closer to embracing its long-term problems and social concerns than the high ground of classic political and social history.

This, then, is a work that raises questions about how historians deal with moral questions and how they, as intellectually-aware individuals, relate to the great intellectual heroes of the past. It should not be seen as a comfortable or comforting work, and many phases of personal discomfort and disenchantment will surely have been experienced by the author herself—aside from the sheer effort of synthesizing such an array of material. But, if this is a work that triumphs in its advocacy of a “messier” approach to history, it is also a clever work; it is written with such an accessible and readable style that it is deliberately setting out to challenge the simplistic narratives of modern France *in the arena where they have most power*—the wider popular market for history. Too often it is the simpler, polarized histories that resonate with a wider audience; “good” and “bad” things are so easy to identify. Historians who write subtle books of “messy” history can often have their conclusions glossed over when they are discussed in the mass media. But the power and elegance of this work mean that Harris's conclusions will never be escaped. She should be applauded as much as anything for making this book immensely readable; it puts her complex, humane conclusions firmly on the turf of the “1789 and all that” market; and by positioning itself in this way, it is a far deeper challenge to the intellectual complacency of latter-day Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards. Indeed, it resonates with the best of the Dreyfusards themselves—the moments when a Jaurès understood the importance of clear but popular communication or when an Anatole France understood the power of a well-crafted story. With its brisk-paced narrative and

analysis that lifts easily off the page, this too is a powerful example of how intellectual work can challenge complacent assumptions by embracing the complexity of the past in a beautifully written volume.

#### Notes

[1] W. C. Sellar and R. J. Yeatman, *1066 and All That: a Memorable History of England, comprising all the parts you can remember, including 103 Good Things, 5 Bad Kings and 2 Genuine Dates* (London: Methuen, 1999), p. 65, 100, and 116.

[2] Duclert documents the grip which anti-Dreyfusard narratives have had on wider public understanding of the Affair, even into the late twentieth century, in *Dreyfus au Panthéon: Voyage au Coeur de la République* (Paris: Galaade, 2007).

[3] It is just a pity that the publication of Harris' book coincided so closely with the appearance of Mona Ozouf's *Composition française: retour sur une enfance bretonne* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009) that she was unable to engage with that wonderful personal study of plural identities, a theme addressed head-on in Harris' conclusion.

[4] Émile Zola, 'Les minutes', *Le Figaro*, 5 December 1897.

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