

H-France Review Vol. 11 (June 2011), No. 123

Pierre Nora, ed., *Rethinking France: Les Lieux de mémoire*. Translation directed by David P. Jordan. Vol. IV: *Histories and Memories*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010. xiv + 479 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, and index. \$99.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-226-59135-2.

Review by Darrin M. McMahon, Florida State University.

It is hard to know what more to say. Can there be a French specialist anywhere who hasn't skimmed the surface of the *Les Lieux de mémoire* at the very least, and more likely plunged in deep at some point, wading down its recesses, before diving into one of its inviting pools? Since the first of its seven volumes appeared in French in 1984, substantial portions of the project's over 5,000 original pages (comprising some 133 collaborators and 127 articles) have been translated into English not once, but twice (the first edition, a 3-volume collection published by Columbia University Press as the *Realms of Memory*, preceding the current series of entirely different essays published by the University of Chicago Press). These various installments have been so often reviewed and so frequently discussed that perhaps a moment of silence would be the most fitting way to bid this, the fourth and final volume, a respectful adieu.

Silence, however, is hard to pull off in print, and especially so for scholars. But for any French specialists who happened to be, well, studying German over the last several decades or otherwise indisposed, and for anyone stumbling on the project for the first time, let me urge you to make me hold my peace by means of your browser. There are excellent syntheses and critical analyses in English, easily accessible on-line, by Jay Winter (*H-NET*), David Bell (*New Republic*), and Hue-Tam Ho Tai (*American Historical Review*) among many others, including first-rate reviews of the first two volumes of this edition by Lloyd Kramer and Peter McPhee on *H-France* (the review of Volume 3, by a reviewer-yet-to-be-known, is on its way). They will explain better than I can here the origin of the project in the vision of its director Pierre Nora, the respected historian and long-time cultural mandarin; his gathering together of a dream team of leading French scholars; and their collective charge to write the history, not of history per se, but of memory, that is the self-conscious (and always selective) embrace of particular facets of the French past. Conceived in a period of crisis in terms of France's own relationship to history, fractured by the upheavals of the twentieth century, as well as in a period witnessing what Nora has described as an "explosion of memory"—with a proliferation of memorials and anniversaries and commemorations not just in France, but throughout the world—the project aimed to investigate historically how such memory comes into being and how it is constructed over time. Probing particular "sites" or "*lieux*" that have played a key role in that process in France, be they actual physical places or texts, moments, symbols or practices, the project also aimed to exercise a critical function, "deconstructing" the "majestic edifice" of French national identity (France, Nation, Republic) that had been assembled so skillfully in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by men such as Ernst Lavisse, the subject of what is perhaps this volume's finest essay, by Nora himself (p. xiii). As various commentators have observed, however, that same critical intent was undermined in part by an elegiac tone that creeps into the work on occasion, suggesting mourning for the crumbling of that very same majestic structure.

*Les Lieux de mémoire*, then, set out to explore the dialectic of memory and history, and this volume, appropriately subtitled "Histories and Memories," "explicitly recapitulates, in

concentrated form, the internal logic of the enterprise” (p. vii). It does so, as Nora observes, by plunging “into time to identify those primary moments when a new relationship with the national and collective past crystallized” (p. viii), and it does so in two principal ways, first by identifying critical “instruments” of memory—those archives, collections, and museums that, from the earliest monastic holdings to the creation of the National Archives and beyond, have been used to contain, preserve, and to shape memory in particular ways, and second, by calling attention to the critical “moments of memory” themselves, those key instances when a “total revision of the connection to the past was crystallized in a single or collective work” (p. x). The volume’s first six essays are devoted to “instruments” and the second part, to “moments.”

While this division makes sense on a conceptual level, it gives the volume as a whole a slightly disjointed feel. Beginning with Bernard Guenée’s essay on the role played by medieval chanceries and monasteries in conserving and creating national memory, the volume proceeds more or less chronologically in its investigation of instruments until the late nineteenth century, ending with Pascal Ory’s sparkling essay on the *Grand Dictionnaire* of Pierre Larousse. But then, rather abruptly, we are back in the Middle Ages, with another essay by Guennée on the *Grandes chroniques de France*, and moving forward at a steady clip toward the “Era of the Annales,” where the volume ends. To be sure, the articles collected here are “an illustrative sampling,” drawn from many possible choices, and so are not intended to be complete. But the doubling back in time from instruments to moments, and the gaps that separate instances of each, is somewhat awkward.

That said, most readers probably won’t read this volume from cover to cover, but dip in where the waters seem most pleasing. Taken one at a time, the essays collected here offer all the individual pleasures with which readers of earlier volumes will already be familiar. Not that every one is easy going. Students of the French National Archives may find Krzysztof Pomian’s seventy-page essay on that institution’s genesis and creation scintillating. But we are not all students of the French National Archives. And those unfamiliar with the notoriously difficult prose of Marcel Gauchet will learn that (the expert translation of Sarah Maza notwithstanding), one has to work hard to penetrate the thicket of his brilliance, even if the labor is well rewarded.

So what more can be said? No grand summing up, of course, can do justice to a project of the richness and breadth of the *Lieux de mémoire*, which has transformed itself—and been transformed—into a *lieu de mémoire* in its own right, an instrument of memory unto itself. Like so many other reviewers, I stand before it, hat in hand, with a great deal of professional reverence, admiration, and respect.

And yet silence, as I say, is hard to keep. Indeed, for all the genuine pleasure I took in sampling the limpid waters of these essays on this particular occasion, I felt more strongly than on previous reads like a swimmer into cleanness leaping, a feeling that made me want to reach down a little deeper and stir up some mud.

Other critics have called attention to the fact already, but when re-reading these essays in 2011, in the midst, on this side of the Atlantic at least, of an explosion of interest in the global dimensions of French history, it is striking just how narrow is the working definition of “France” that is here to be re-thought. This particular volume illustrates the point even more graphically than others in the series. One will find here no mention of Guadeloupe or Guyane, La Réunion or Martinique, regions that share the currency and postage stamps of the metropole, and whose citizens’ passports declare them to be “French.” There are no swirling ghosts of empire, no furtive recollections along the Quai de la Fosse, no Exposition Universelle, no Archives d’Outre-mer, no museums of the Acadians returned to France, no *pieds-noirs*. And so we proceed from the Franks and Gauls to their offspring in the Old Régime. We encounter

eminent figures of the Revolution along the way, nineteenth-century *grands hommes*--Guizot, Larousse, Thierry--and some of their twentieth-century successors, from Bloch to Braudel. They are important tales delightfully told, and yet they read, one after the other, a little too much like French men remembering French men who remembered French men (and they are in this volume, for what it is worth, all men, authors and subjects alike, though Maza, Christine Haynes, Gayle Levy, and Teresa Lavander Fagan, all scholars themselves, have performed the noble service of translating four of the essays). Narcissus turned himself to stone by gazing in this way. Had he thrust his face into the water, and perhaps even down to the mud, he might have saved himself from petrification.

In his other essay in this volume on "The Era of the Annales" which, in contrast to the first, sings with an almost lyrical beauty, Krzysztof Pomian recalls an investigation organized in the 1960s that he describes as "symptomatic of what might be called the *Annales* spirit" (p. 435). The work was collective and international, and it set out to recover deserted villages--villages "reduced to traces discernible only to those trained to look for them but that, once recognized, were counted, mapped and excavated, yielding masses of otherwise unobtainable information about life in earlier times" (p. 436). What was symptomatic in the approach was that it "entailed a shifting of scholarly attention from objects very much alive in the national memory--events, institutions, individuals--to others that had been forgotten or had never even entered the level of consciousness, no one in their own time having been aware of their existence" (p. 436). And as he emphasizes, the deserted villages "can serve as a symbol of those elements of the past that had been eliminated from national memory or had never figured in it" (p. 436).

The Era of the Annales is over now, but as the essays in this volume emphasize by their very silence, there is still ample need for precisely this kind of excavation, carried out, by whatever methods, on the far-flung forgotten villages of this thing called "France." The connections of those global villages traverse the world, and some, once deserted, now teem with people who look little like Franks or Gauls (however *they* may have looked), but whose history is no less a part of the national patrimony for that. Nora appreciates that fact, of course, noting at the end of his introduction to this volume that "patrimony memory" today expresses itself, and must express itself, in the "recovery of the nation's repressed past," including the "entire colonial adventure" (p. xiii). For the most part, though, there is little trace of such recovery here, which suggests that the dialectic of history and memory in France must clash a few more times still before it offers a new synthesis for the age that is upon us.

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Pierre Nora, "Introduction"

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Krzysztof Pomian, "The Archives: From the *Trésor des chartes* to the CARAN"

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Bernard Guenée “The Grandes Chroniques de France: The *Roman* of Kings (1274–1518)”

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ISSN 1553-9172