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John Hardman, *Overture to Revolution: The 1787 Assembly of Notables and the Crisis of France's Old Regime*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. vi-338 pp. Appendices, bibliography, and index. \$115.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-19-958577-9.

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Several recent books bear witness to a renewed interest in the years that immediately preceded or, I would contend, actually began the French Revolution. These include studies on the origins of the Revolution, and others with a distinctive political interpretation--the latter long ignored by the dominance of the socio-economic interpretation. John Hardman's *Overture to Revolution: The 1787 Assembly of Notables and the Crisis of France's Old Regime* is the latest contribution to this body of works.[1]

Hardman has, to his credit, three histories on the reign of Louis XVI and three volumes of documents, edited or co-edited, that cover the period of Louis' reign and the Revolution.[2] That may make him *primus inter pares* among British historians who delve into the political history of that period, unveiling in particular the words and actions of the king and his ministers.

The first Assembly of Notables, in session from February to May 1787, is the almost exclusive focus of Hardman's study, with nine chapters devoted to its preparation and meeting. Hardman gives cursory attention to the second Assembly of Notables, convened in November-December 1788 to advise on the meeting of the Estates General set for May 1789. The conclusion of his book offers an overview of developments after the meeting of the first Assembly of Notables: from the demand of the Paris Parlement (the superior court) in July 1787 for a meeting of an Estates General, to the opening days of that Estates General in the spring of 1789. An epilogue within the conclusion is an almost impassioned description of the harrying of the former controller-general Calonne, who had proposed the meeting of the Notables and had prepared the reforms presented to that body. Calonne confidently expected the Notables to approve his reforms. Instead, they lashed out at most of his projects, causing his dismissal as minister in early April 1787 and his subsequent flight from France to escape prosecution.

The 1787 Assembly of Notables was first studied in detail by Albert Goodwin in two lengthy articles and is also the subject of Olga Ilovařsky's book. The second Assembly of Notables (November-December 1788) is, along with the first Assembly, also examined in Jean Égret's book and in mine. Goodwin's articles and Egret's chapters on the first Assembly of Notables explore the reform program the government presented to the Notables, and are less detailed on the Notables' responses to these reforms. Ilovařsky's book is an exposition and defense of Calonne's reforms in the face of attacks against him. My own book concentrates on the Notables' reactions to the government's program in 1787 and in 1788: their criticisms, modifications and rejection of reforms, and the aims that motivated them.[3]

As we may expect of Hardman from his previous writings and the sources he has researched, his latest book takes us behind the scenes, before decisions were made and actions taken in the full light of history. In the government, king and ministers initiated proposals, debated options and strategies, argued divergent views, and in the end the king decided. Decision-making was often slow, sometimes abrupt, and always contentious, rife with divisions among ministers and between the king and ministers. This tortuous path led to decisions on convening an assembly of notables, the reforms to propose, the

procedures for the assembly and its composition and organization. The work then traces the responses of a stunned king and minister to the Notables' criticisms of the government's reform program, the dismissal of Calonne, the appointment of a new minister, the refusal in 1787 to reappoint the former head of the Treasury, Jacques Necker, and finally the decision to bring a quick end to this Assembly of Notables. Hardman's account discredits the claims of Necker (who appears as an egocentric) and of former Controller-General Joly de Fleury that there was no deficit when they were in charge of government finances (1776-1781 and 1781-1783, respectively). With less dramatic detail he shows members of the Assembly engaged in deliberating on policy, a practice novel to them. They confronted new proposals, formed cabals and factions, weighed responses, mounted attacks and devised counter-proposals. Activities within the government, more than in the Assembly, are Hardman's prime interest.

In taking us behind the scenes into the king's councils and committees in 1786-1787, Hardman reveals to his readers, whether he intended it or not, a dysfunctional government and the anomalous role of the king. Collective ministerial responsibility was not a normative practice in ancien regime France. Louis XVI along with his predecessors, Hardman states, believed a united ministry might constrain their independent authority. Yet a disunited ministry in that critical year of the first Assembly of Notables subverted the king's objectives. Hardman highlights deep divisions on policy that set ministers against ministers before and during 1787, as documented in the journal of maréchal de Castries, Minister for the Navy, and in letters to the king of Miromesnil, Keeper of the Seals, as well as the latter's views cited in other contemporary writings. Castries and Miromesnil especially among the ministers even stirred up opposition to Calonne's reforms among the Notables, helping to undermine policies that the king strongly endorsed. In 1787, in an unprecedented move according to Hardman, Louis identified Calonne's program as his own policy. Ministerial opposition, such as Castries and Miromesnil engaged in, did not serve the king's aim to preserve his power but was political sabotage not only of a minister, but of royal authority.

There is a further anomaly to the historical figure and judgment of Louis XVI in this book. Hardman, as generations of historians before him, depicts the king in the years 1787-1788 as indecisive and weak in the face of mounting opposition from the Notables and then the parlements. Joël Félix, in contrast, portrays the king as obstinate in defending his royal authority, rejecting measures that would reduce the sphere of his independent action.^[4] The evidence Hardman provides seems to undercut the interpretation he offers; or perhaps his analysis is "bicephalous" (to use the author's word)—his characterization of Calonne's proposed reforms as promoting both "equality" and reinvigorated absolutism (see also below). In my reading of Hardman, Louis XVI comes across as decisive, persistent, obdurate, refusing to concede to the demands of the Assembly of Notables that would diminish his powers, whether over access to the government's financial accounts, annual publication of the budget, the creation of an autonomous financial council, greater authority to the provincial assemblies or a reduced role for the intendants. Under pressure he ceded on the first two, permitting Notables to look at government financial accounts (which heightened their confusion about the amount of the deficit) and agreed to the publication of the budget, but not annually. However, Louis made certain that the financial council demanded by the Notables consisted of government officials, and the provincial assemblies proposed by the Crown were only consultative with no elected members. In so doing he sacrificed the reputations and careers of two ministers who bore the blame for unpopular policies—Calonne and Loménie de Brienne, the latter a former Notable and leading proponent of the Assembly's counter-proposals.

Hardman's depiction of the Notables' opposition is ambivalent, if not bicephalous. They defended privilege, he argues. Which privilege may be ferreted out from his account. Not the privilege of fiscal equality, which they accepted. Nor did they seek a monopoly of power in provincial assemblies, since a majority of Notables accepted doubling of the Third Estate and vote by head (which the second Assembly of Notables rejected in 1788 for the Estates General). Provincial privilege they defended, the privilege of provinces with estates (*pays d'états*) to consent to and collect taxes, which they sought to extend to the new provincial assemblies. The Notables' insistence on expanding the authority of provincial assemblies was fundamental to their efforts to secure provincial autonomy throughout France in place of royal centralized administration.

Personal ambition, Hardman emphasizes, was a motive for the Notables' opposition. His examples are Loménie de Brienne, who sought a ministerial post, and Boisgelin, Archbishop of Aix, who craved a royal honor. Yet their arguments in the Assembly, not elaborated in this book, had broader objectives—to limit royal authority. Boisgelin, for example, sought financial controls over government expenditures and hoped provincial assemblies would be vehicles for a national representative body. Neckerites in the Assembly (with the clergy the two strongest factions, says Hardman), aided by the minister Castries, also a Neckerite, sought to restore Necker to the ministry. Necker comes across as highly self-interested. His influence, in Hardman's depiction, seems to operate on the Assembly as a *deus ex machina*, driving the opposition. At the same time, we are told, Necker's goal and that of the Notables went beyond his individual ministerial ambition. Both aimed for France to evolve "towards an English style of government"—an aspiration certainly not exclusive to Necker and Neckerites (p. 287). In this light a "queen's party" in the Assembly was a nullity, since her political preference was for the absolute monarchy.

Hardman's ambivalent interpretation of the Notables comes through as well in his description of Calonne's "bicephalous" reforms (to use the author's word). The minister sought to advance equality and uniformity: equality of taxation through the elimination of most tax privileges, uniformity in fiscal and general administration, and a unified national market. Fiscal equality, a tariff-free national market, and administrative uniformity were, Hardman argues, precursors of the reforms of August 4, 1789. Calonne also proposed a permanent land tax, rising or falling with annual production. While the Notables accepted fiscal equality, administrative uniformity and a permanent land tax were anathema to them, portending a despotic monarchy in their view. Not even Loménie de Brienne's reforms, modifying Calonne's original proposals to gain the Notables' support, mollified his former colleagues in the Assembly.

It is hard not to discern, in this other side to Hardman's interpretation, the Notables' aim to transform the absolute centralized monarchy into a decentralized and limited monarchy. They rejected Calonne's project, he writes in his concluding chapter, because "liberty was more prized in 1787 than equality" (p. 286), an aspiration Hardman seems unwilling to embrace in his overall interpretation. Or perhaps he learned from what he had written and changed his mind in concluding his book.

Miromesnil was more clairvoyant on the outcome of the first Assembly of Notables. He forewarned the king, when Louis was pondering the convening of an assembly of notables, that such a body would not embrace the proposed reforms, as the king and Calonne optimistically believed—a judgment Hardman endorses. And he did his utmost to assure that outcome. A former president of the Parlement of Rouen, he maneuvered with parliamentary magistrates among the Notables to fortify their opposition. Yet his traditional parliamentary outlook, which viewed the parliamentary courts as the dominant curb on royal authority, was being superseded during the weeks of the Assembly's meetings. The Notables instead proposed provincial decentralization, financial controls, even a "national assembly" as more effective limits on royal authority.

The Assembly of Notables in 1787, Hardman argues, was the "overture to revolution.... As the crisis deepened faction was replaced by ideology...and this was harder to manage" (p. 296).^[5] More than overture, it was the beginning of the Revolution, in my view—as faction ceded to policy and the public came increasingly to support goals the Notables advanced. The 1787 Assembly unleashed actions, events and developments in its aftermath that led inexorably to a revolutionary outcome, from the king's decisions to the involvement of a public broader than the elite Notables. A broad public, together with an elite of Notables, joined forces to demand lower taxes, public control of government expenditures, consent to taxes and some form of participation in governance. Only occasionally does Hardman allude to public opinion, just enough to indicate that the public sided with the Assembly and turned against the government. Public opinion was not Hardman's focus. That said, let the author be free to set his own sights, and we thank him for taking us behind the scenes where king and ministers deliberated, disputed,

and decided on policy.[6]

NOTES

[1] Other recent writings include Peter R. Campbell, ed., *The Origins of the French Revolution (Problems in Focus)* (Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Joël Félix, *Louis XVI et Marie-Antoinette. Un couple en politique* (Paris: Payot, 2006); Vivian R. Gruder, *The Notables and the Nation: The Political Schooling of the French, 1787-1788* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2007); Olga Ilovaïsky, *La disgrâce de Calonne* (Paris: Comité pour l'histoire économique et financière de la France, 2008); Thomas Kaiser and Dale K. Van Kley, eds., *From Deficit to Deluge: The Origins of the French Revolution* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011). Writings on the Notables and on the "origins" of the Revolution in turn owe debts of gratitude to their immediate predecessors: Albert Goodwin, "Calonne, the Assembly of French Notables of 1787 and the Origins of the 'Révolte Nobiliaire,'" *English Historical Review* 60/240(May 1946): 202-234; Albert Goodwin, "Calonne, the Assembly of French Notables of 1787 and the Origins of the 'Révolte Nobiliaire' (Continued)," *English Historical Review* 61/241(September 1946): 329-377; Jean Égret, *La Pré-Révolution française (1787-1788)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962); William Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1980, 1st ed.).

[2] John Hardman, *Louis XVI* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993); John Hardman, *French Politics, 1774-1789, from the Accession of Louis XVI to the Fall of the Bastille* (London; New York: Longman, 1995); John Hardman, *Louis XVI: The Silent King* (London: Arnold, 2000); J.M. Roberts, R.C. Cobb and J. Hardman, eds., *French Revolution Documents* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966-1973); John Hardman and Munro Price, eds., *Louis XVI and the comte de Vergennes: Correspondence 1774-1787* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1998); John Hardman, *French Revolution Source Book* (London: Arnold, 1999).

[3] Ilovaïsky, *La disgrâce de Calonne*; Égret, *La Pré-Révolution française (1787-1788)*; Goodwin, "Calonne, the Assembly of French Notables of 1787 and the Origins of the 'Révolte Nobiliaire'"; Gruder, *The Notables and the Nation*.

[4] Félix, *Louis XVI et Marie-Antoinette*, pp. 358, 395-397, 401, 420, 602-603.

[5] In his ministerial history, Munro Price similarly acknowledges that "(i)n periods of relative quiescence...differences were generally personal rather than political. It was only during periods of crisis, like the Maupeou *coup d'état* or the pre-revolution, when the political world suddenly polarized, that questions of principle emerged." See Munro Price, *Preserving the Monarchy The comte de Vergennes, 1774-1787* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 145.

[6] There are several errata in the text worth pointing out. Throughout Hardman cites "Bachaumont" when referring to the *Mémoire secrets*, but in 1787 Bachaumont was no longer involved with that manuscript newsletter. The journalist-editor then was Moufle d'Angerville. See "*Mémoires secrets 2* (1777-1789)," in Jean Sgard, ed., *Dictionnaire des journaux 1600-1789* (Paris: Universitas; Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1991), pp. 829-835. "Brochard de Saron" should be Bochard or Bochart de Saron (p. 19). "Foucquet" should be Fouquet (p. 303). Chaumont de la Galizière was no longer intendant in Lorraine (1758-1777) but was intendant in Alsace (1777-1790) (p. 69). The date in Gruder for the sale to the public of the *Collection des mémoires*, including the *Avertissement*, is April 1st, not April 2nd (p. 199). The "populace" was not the same as "non-taxpayers," since peasants who did not own land still paid the *taille d'exploitation* and city dwellers paid indirect taxes (p. 198).

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