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Geoffrey Wall. *The Enlightened Physician: Achille-Cléophas Flaubert, 1784-1846*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013. xvii + 219 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$40.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN: 978-1-906165-47-578-1-906165-47-5.

Review by Kathleen Wellman, Southern Methodist University.

Geoffrey Wall, best known as the author of *Flaubert, a Life*, turns his attention to the father of the famous novelist in the book under review.[1] The sixteen, brief chapters offer a rich context for the life of Wall's protagonist. Each chapter averages ten pages, including several short, discrete discussions which together offer a brief but diverting read. There is no doubt that the senior Flaubert lived through fascinating times, as Wall puts it, "from the *ancien régime* to the railroad age." (p. xvi). This book gives Wall the opportunity to discuss many aspects of those times.

Wall briefly situates the Flaubert family in sixteenth-century village culture, setting the stage for the family's dramatic advance in the late eighteenth century, when Flaubert's father, Nicolas, and two of his uncles all practiced veterinary medicine. After his father was involved in a minor financial scandal, accused by some of his clients of overcharging them, the family moved to Nogent-sur-Seine, where Achille-Cléophas grew up.

Wall places family members against the background of political changes at the national level as well as within their local context. He documents the vicissitudes of life under the Revolution for the family, noting that Flaubert's father, Nicolas, was repeatedly denounced, forced to defend himself, and even sent to prison. This allows Wall to digress for a discussion of the prison, Le Bicêtre, speculating on what Nicolas's experience there might have been as well as its possible effect on his young son. Wall also describes the political backdrop of Flaubert's education during the Directory when his instructors remained sympathetic to the Enlightenment. Flaubert's later practice of medicine in Rouen occurred during the Napoleonic era but extended into the Restoration. He experienced these dramatic political changes and doubtless had to adapt to them. Unfortunately, the record is not very illuminating as to exactly how he did that.

Wall also provides rich material about the social history of this period. He discusses the family's status in village society, and in a particularly vivid chapter, describes the cultural delights the young Flaubert might have enjoyed when he assumed his position in Rouen, including an extensive discussion of the local bookstore owner's career.

The experiences of Flaubert's forebears allow Wall to attempt to bring his subject into sharper focus to speculate on their influence on his character. This is not a simple matter: Flaubert *père* wrote little, little is known about the family before its most famous member, and Flaubert's claim to fame rests on the later career of his son. Wall sometimes supports his conclusions about Flaubert's character with allusions to his son's depiction of doctors in novels. For example, Wall ultimately concludes that praise for Dr. Larivière referred to Gustave's father.

Wall explores a number of medical issues, including the education Flaubert received in Paris, the salon established by his teacher, Jacques Salgues, the contemporary practices of dissection, and the cholera epidemic in Rouen. He describes the medical establishment in Rouen from the operation of Hôtel Dieu under Flaubert's predecessor, Jean-Baptiste Laumonier, as well as during Flaubert's more conscientious practice. The fact that the Flaubert came into contact with Alexandre von Humbolt and Louis Jacques Thénard allows Wall to offer short digressions on each of them.

The associations Wall draws to situate his subject are interesting, but many seem only tangential to Flaubert. For example, a chapter treating Flaubert's medical education begins with a discussion of the testing of the guillotine, largely because according to family legend, Nicholas narrowly escaped execution. When Flaubert avoids conscription in Napoleon's army, Wall dedicates a chapter to conscription and the ways Flaubert might have illegitimately avoided it, if indeed his certification was fraudulently obtained. A reference to Torquato Tasso in Flaubert's students' lecture notes to his course on physiology provokes a lengthy discussion of the poet. These digressions are not without interest, but they don't tell the reader much about book's subject.

Ultimately, as his title asserts, Wall considers Flaubert to be an enlightened physician, but what that means in this particular case is not entirely clear. Wall first describes Flaubert as enlightened because he coupled clinical observation with empathy. He then notes that Flaubert read Voltaire and was taught by Benoist-Lamothe, a disciple of Voltaire. Wall even goes so far as to claim that "imaginatively, he (Flaubert) became Voltaire" (p. 46). Although Flaubert's writings are quite slim, those we have, including his students' lecture notes on physiology, do not refer to the soul or to the divine, leading Wall to cite a philosophical filiation with the Enlightenment. Wall associates Flaubert with Cabanis, noting that Cabanis's point, "habit dulls pleasure and pain", became a Flaubert family maxim" (p. 71). So too, Wall contends that "in a decisive imaginary act of affiliation, Flaubert elected to be one of the children of Bichat," (p. 73), just as Dr. Larivière did in *Madame Bovary*.

Even when the book focuses on Flaubert's greatest professional success, the awarding of the Legion of Honour in 1833, he himself seems curiously elusive in some sections of this book. For example, a chapter juxtaposes topics addressed in the *Journal of Rouen* against Flaubert's case histories to correlate the two as indicative of the social issues troubling Rouen. Another chapter treats Flaubert's late marriage, but focuses almost exclusively on his wife's status, and Gustave's much later comments on his mother provide the most revealing information about the marriage.

Only the last chapter of the book, which treats Flaubert at the end of his career, focuses entirely on him. A decade of contentious relations with his colleagues, especially his former protégé and his deputy, ended with his resignation and almost immediate death, at the age of sixty-two, due to an abscessed leg and followed by the elaborate funeral due a local luminary.

Wall began his book by noting that Flaubert was well-known in his day—a prominent doctor in a relatively small town. But he is now known only as the father of his famous son, Gustave. While Wall offers a rich background to Flaubert's life and points to the events that unfolded around him, the intellectual figures who did or may have influenced him, and the medical context that surrounded his own practice of medicine, none of that contextual richness allows Flaubert himself to emerge. While Flaubert may have been affected by the developments around him, as Wall consistently emphasizes, he does not impact them nor do we know much about the extent of their impact on him.

Wall proposes his book as "an informal group portrait of a generation of the medical profession," (p. xiii) but it seems rather to offer an engaging set of discussions of influences or possible influences on a relatively accomplished professional man seeking to make his way in a post-Revolutionary world of political, economic, professional, and intellectual change.

Flaubert's context offers a compelling account of the complexities of local and national politics and social change. Perhaps that led him to keep his head down and not express opinions that could prove controversial. In any case, he left little indication of his own views. Even if his life story does not emerge as vivid, his example should perhaps provoke historians and biographers to appreciate the complexity and richness of the context of other lives of relatively modest accomplishment in rapidly changing times.

NOTE

[1] Geoffrey Wall, *Flaubert: A Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001).

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