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Mi Gyung Kim, *The Imagined Empire. Balloon Enlightenments in Revolutionary Europe*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016. xxv + 427 pp. Plates, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$54.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9780822944652.

Review by Larry Stewart, University of King's College.

Experiment and entertainment converged in the balloon rage of the late eighteenth century. Balloon launches produced crowds of spectators, including volunteers building the envelopes and the carriages for those willing to take the risk of flight, those involved in the laborious preparation of airs, and those awaiting disaster. Mi Gyung Kim's impressive foray into a wide range of private and public documents reveals the enormous scope of interest throughout Europe and even in America. Not limited to the well-known brothers Montgolfier, these events attracted rivals like Jacques-Alexandre-César Charles, Jean-Pierre Blanchard, Pilâtre de Rozier and far too many others to mention here. The inevitable crowds composed a broad spectrum who watched these "material spectacles" which, oddly, did not seem to attract much "literary discussion" (p. 26). Yet, it is also argued, the launches blurred the "boundary between the literate 'public' and the illiterate 'people'" (p. 26), then so much feared throughout revolutionary Europe. The public contemplation of the balloon attempts and their many failures nevertheless constructed the "allure of a public artifact" (p. 58) and were subject to much controversy, much of it surely printed, much of it spontaneous, and all too often riotous, to the great alarm of local authorities. Thus, a "harmonious public sphere" (p. 63) was impossible to sustain despite all assertions of utility even when, it is proposed, "polite science" attempted to exclude "the uneducated 'people'" (p. 54).

The cultivation of polite science did not long survive the early audiences of the Tuileries and was consumed by chaos. Spectacles, in practice, others argued, "must be for the *people*..." (p. 105). Balloon launches, from central Paris or the court at Versailles, from many provincial towns, throughout the Continent and in Britain's spa towns, soon put paid to all notions of exclusion. Unfortunately, this work induces some confusion, arguing that "the balloon ascent constituted an open theatre that fostered fermentation among the populace who could harbor emancipatory and revolutionary dreams" while also asserting that workers who "forsook their daily wages to participate in an event that promised to give their miserable lives a historic meaning were difficult to appease once they were disappointed" (p. 149). But not all launches were failures. Nor is there much evidence here that attendance was in hope for liberation of any kind. This is surely an overreach.

One of the great difficulties with this otherwise promising work is in its frequent use of

confusing and infelicitous phrases. This is compounded by asserting a profound philosophical or social meaning in attendance at balloon entertainments. It is undoubtedly true that the “balloon became a new fashion that swept over the European continent and beyond...” but what is meant by being subject to “cultural translations” (p. 195) remains obscure. Were launches really adventures of an “alternative, potentially republican, nation” (p. 2)? At the same time, Kim argues, “If the balloon became a national artifact by forging a broad consensus...it helped change the scale of the imagined nation across the sociopolitical spectrum” (p. 106). While there were clearly many models of many engines, including balloons, along the Seine, on the boulevards and in the cafes, it is impossible to see any consensus emerge, especially when she later asserts the “motley balloon publics did not automatically constitute an electoral polity” (p.284). It is impossible to see here a broad political consequence from balloons rising over an amazed crowd in so many disparate locations.

Of course, as Kim points out, there were other places where balloons attracted attention beyond the many French provincial towns and numerous Parisian competitors. Indeed, many practitioners took their skills across the English Channel to London, British spas, and country towns. Here too the view is surely one of overreach and uncertainty. It is possible to argue that French practitioners even in England reflected an imperial rivalry. But the view of the apparent indifference of the Royal Society is drawn from the scepticism of some, while it is obvious that many others were anxious to give the airs a trial. Kim’s assertion that its President, Joseph Banks, only had a loose association with the British state is unfortunate, as both Banks and Henry Dundas clearly exploited the Board of Trade for scientific, as well as commercial benefit. Indeed, there were many fellows of the Royal Society, like James Watt and Matthew Boulton, who were curious about balloons. Likewise the lecturer James Dinwiddie got into a conflict with Richard Crosbie in Ireland over launches before travelling through Britain demonstrating the device. But it remains unclear how balloons, or much else, mirrored how “Britons saw their nation as a modern Atlantis that desperately needed serious reflection and a new moral foundation” (pp. 231-232). While there was bitter conflict in Britain during the regime of the William Pitt the Younger, there were many people on both sides of a republican divide who took interest in things scientific and no one could convincingly claim any monopoly on moral or political regeneration.

While this study has much to recommend it, much of it seems over-determined. Spectators were often uncontrollable during launches, especially if they failed, but the notion that they constituted a “people-machine,” with a “collective yearning for a new machine polity” (p. 151) seems an overreach—such was the fear in many places of the inability to limit the behavior of crowds, especially the large ones reported as far apart as Paris, Bordeaux, Lyon, or Lille. This work is undermined by the many efforts to escape an empiricist or realist description and to produce a Foucauldian archaeology. It is difficult to find “a broad consensus” generated by the balloons or their crowds. It may well be that “virtuous citizens” disappeared “without a trace as the liminal moment of uncertain promises devolved into a revolutionary crisis” (p. 173) But who? Where is the evidence? It is entirely unclear to suggest that “If the balloon weakened the king-machine, it failed to implement an alternative machine polity or the people-machine” (p. 173). Did the balloon really mediate the apparent border zones between intellectual or social boundaries “thereby shoring up the possibility of modern politics and cultures” (p. 198)? By comparison to contemporary Mesmerism, the “public transcript on ballooning,” it is argued here, “screened out malcontent voices and forged a consensus” (p. 288). What consensus? It is unconvincing to describe the balloon as “a technology of mass mobilization across the

revolutionary divide by materializing the vision of a unified nation...” however “malleable” (p. 293).

It must be said that while the exploration of many sources is the strength of this work, it is also hobbled by many confusing and problematic phrases and an ill-advised attempt to make the balloon moments more intellectually and socially crucial than they really were. There could have been no consistent political sense across the conflicting commercial and moral imperatives of disparate nations and empires. Hence, one must surely wonder at the contributions of the editors of the University of Pittsburgh Press when many of the difficulties here could have been readily addressed.

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