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Robert Darnton, *A Literary Tour de France: The World of Books on the Eve of the French Revolution*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. xv + 358 pp. Maps, figures, notes, and index. \$34.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9780195144512.

Review by Christine Haynes, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

For over fifty years now, Robert Darnton has mined a single archive of the Société Typographique de Neuchâtel (STN) in Switzerland—where he has since 1965 spent some fourteen summers and one winter—to reconstruct the book trade in France during the Enlightenment. His most recent work recycles this material to trace a “literary tour de France” on the eve of the French Revolution. This book and especially its accompanying website bring to life some of the important intermediaries in the pre-revolutionary book trade.[1] In the end, however, this literary “tour” leaves us no closer to understanding how the books that they helped to diffuse shaped ideas in France at this key historical juncture.

To provide a new angle on the pre-revolutionary book trade, this book spotlights one of its traveling salesmen, Jean-François Favarger, who between July and November 1778 toured much of the southern half of France to survey retailers and generate orders for its wares. Employing a diary kept by Favarger as well as the instructions given to him, the letters he sent back, and the expenses he recorded on this trip, Darnton recounts his journey through the Jura mountain range, down the Rhône River to the Mediterranean, through southwestern France to Bordeaux, and across the center of the country, to return home in time for winter. This journey is visualized on the accompanying website, which in addition to digital copies of these various documents, includes detailed maps and descriptions of the localities visited by the salesman. A Swiss Protestant who was twenty-nine years old at the time of this trip, Favarger would later open his own business, with his brother Samuel, in the grocery trade. In 1778, his job was to survive this arduous journey, on horseback, and inform his employers about the book trade in France. With details such as the cost of a whip Favarger purchased as his horse became increasingly sick and tired (p. 169), Darnton provides a vivid account of the difficult conditions faced by traveling salesmen in the eighteenth century.

Through the story of Favarger, Darnton revives the sorts of intermediaries, including women, who were critical to the “system” of the book trade under the Old Regime (p. ix). Carefully delineating the typology of booksellers, from wealthy wholesalers through smaller retailers to nomadic *marchands forains*, he shows how, in most towns visited by Favarger, there were usually only one or two powerful booksellers at the center, supplemented by desperate marginal dealers. Building on his previous work such as *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime*, Darnton is particularly good here at highlighting the critical role played by shippers and smugglers in distributing books from publishers outside the borders of France to retailers across the country: the network of shipping agents, warehousemen, innkeepers, wagon drivers, porters, insurers, and spies who worked on the ground to negotiate—and evade—the restrictions placed on the trade by the French state.[2] Up to 1783, when the monarchy decreed that all shipments had to be cleared by the *chambre syndicale* in Paris, these agents persistently—but ultimately

unsuccessfully—struggled to find a northwest passage for their wares from Switzerland to the French capital.

Darnton also illuminates what he calls the “capillary system” of the book trade, the nomadic peddlers operating outside of the guild system who ordered mainly forbidden literature to market to customers from wagons and at fairs throughout the French countryside. Noting that many of these peddlers hailed from the same province, Normandy, and even the same town of Coutances, where “entire families lived from peddling, generation after generation” (p. 186), he resurrects some colorful examples, including Noël Gille, nicknamed “La Pistole,” who rolled across France with a horse and wagon to ply his trade in books. Some of these peddlers were in turn supplied by marginal dealers such as Malherbe in the town of Loudon, who ordered books from the STN to supply a number of roving dealers.

From the tales of such dealers, Darnton aims to provide a “panoramic view” of the literary marketplace in France at the end of the Old Regime (p. 302). This “panoramic view” reiterates many of the same themes as his earlier works: the cutthroat competition of the “*Encyclopédie* war” between the STN and other publishers of this *magnum opus*; the significance of the “literary underground” in spreading Enlightenment; the preponderance of “forbidden” books among the best-sellers of the Old Regime; the high cost of paper and shipping for publishers and hence readers; the role of the “exchange system” between publishers in accumulating a variety of offerings for their customers (p. 94); the prevalence of piracy, especially among foreign and provincial publishers; the practice of marrying legal and illegal books in shipments to evade customs and guild officials; the importance of *confiance*, or trust, between businessmen; and the book trade’s “lost illusions” during the transition from the old to the new regime in France.[3] As in his previous works, Darnton reminds us again (and again) that “selling books was a tough business in the eighteenth century—at every level, from publishers and their journeyman printers down to booksellers and their clerks” (p. 161).

From case studies of eighteen booksellers who placed significant orders of 1,145 titles, Darnton attempts to provide a snapshot of literary demand in France on the eve of the French Revolution. Admitting that he is focused more on the diffusion than on the creation or the reception of books, he concludes by compiling a bestseller list, not just of forbidden works, as in earlier books and articles, but of all works ordered from the STN, exclusive of the ones that they themselves published. Including relatively well-known authors of Enlightenment literature such as Mercier, Raynal, Mirabeau, Linguet, and Voltaire, this list also contains a wide variety of other genres, from political libels (especially against Jacques Necker) and pornographic pamphlets, to sentimental novels, travel narratives, Protestant tracts, schoolbooks, almanacs, local publications, and children’s literature. Containing a mix of Protestant piety and Enlightenment irreligion, this list suggests that there was no unified French market until the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, Darnton emphasizes that there was significant homogeneity in the demand surveyed by Favarger. Concluding that his statistics show that “Enlightenment ideas penetrated deeply into the culture of the Ancien Régime,” he insists that this literary culture provided a vision of an alternate reality, which was turned into action in 1789 (p. 305).

In compiling his new bestseller list, Darnton is careful again to address the question of the representativeness of the STN archive. Emphasizing that the exchange system employed by most major book-dealers meant that any one company’s list was more diverse and hence typical than that of a contemporary publisher, he concludes that the orders submitted to this Swiss publisher were indeed representative of demand in provincial France. Others, however, have taken issue with his approach. In a new digital as well as two-volume book project based on the archives of the Société Typographique de Neuchâtel, *The French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe*, Simon Burrows and Mark Curran insist that the offerings of publishers in Switzerland differed not just from those in France, but also from others outside the country’s borders, for instance in the Netherlands.[4] In contrast to Darnton, the FBTEE project tabulates actual sales, rather than just orders, from the STN. Via the firm’s (incomplete) account books and supplementary records, Burrows, Curran, and their team have compiled data on real-time purchases (some 70,000 transactions, or over 400,000 copies, of 3,987 editions to 2,895 contacts)

between 1769 and 1794. Countering that sales do not equate with readers because purchases were often made by intermediaries, Darnton dismisses these statistics as “so trivial as to make the map [generated by the FBTEE] useless” (p. 272).

Ultimately, as Darnton and Burrows admit in a related online exchange in *Reviews in History*, this dispute boils down to the question of whether demand or supply provides a better lens for assessing cultural mentalities.[5] Of course, there are advantages and disadvantages to both approaches. Ideally, as Burrows himself encourages, both would be used together. In the end, however, Darnton remains uninterested in understanding these mentalities. He concludes his *Literary Tour* by admitting, “The story turns on the problem of identifying literary demand, an empirical question, which can be answered. Of course, it raises larger questions about the relation of literature to revolution, questions that concern public opinion and collective action, which could be debated endlessly. Important as they are, I have not pursued them in this book, because I decided to restrict the argument to concrete issues resolvable within the range of the history of books as it has developed as a discipline” (p. 304).

Fair enough. But by once again punting on the question of how the diffusion of books shaped the mentality of readers, Darnton misses an opportunity to further his earlier analysis of the role of the Enlightenment book trade in sparking the French Revolution. Citing mainly his own previous works and older, mostly French, studies, he ignores a vast body of recent scholarship on publishing and reading in Europe across the revolutionary era. Once again, as the dust jacket summarizes, the author provides “nothing less”—but also nothing more—than a “tour d’horizon of books and bookselling in eighteenth-century provincial France.” While this literary “tour” may advance the history of business by illuminating the work of traveling salesmen, smugglers, and peddlers, it brings nothing very new to our understanding of the Enlightenment.

NOTES

[1] The accompanying website is at www.robertdarnton.org. The main conclusions of the book and website were summarized in a previous article by Darnton, “The Demand for Literature in France, 1769-1789, and the Launching of a Digital Archive,” *Journal of Modern History* 87 (Sept. 2015): 509-531.

[2] Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

[3] For these arguments see Robert Darnton, “The *Encyclopédie* Wars of Prerevolutionary France,” *American Historical Review* 78, 5 (Dec. 1973): 1331-1352; Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime*; and Robert Darnton, *The Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995).

[4] *The French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe*, vol. 1, *Selling Enlightenment*, by Mark Curran, and vol. 2, *Enlightenment Bestsellers*, by Simon Burrows (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), and related website: <http://fbtee.uws.edu.au/main/>.

[5] Robert Darnton, “Review of *The French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe, 1769-1794*,” *Reviews in History*, no. 1355, and response by Simon Burrows, at <https://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1355>.

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