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Jacques Cantier, *Lire sous l'Occupation: Livres, lecteurs, lectures 1939-1944*. Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2019. 381 pp. Notes, sources, bibliography, and index. €25.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-271-09332-5.

Review by Michael Holland, St Hugh's College, Oxford.

This book began life as part of the dossier for its author's *habilitation à diriger les recherches*, and as such it not only highlights the admirable--indeed enviable--rigor with which doctoral supervision is carried out in France; it reveals on its author's part a remarkably exhaustive and detailed knowledge of the Occupation years, which guarantees that students who work under his supervision will receive expert and discriminating guidance. Repurposed as a work of scholarship, it rises resourcefully and mostly successfully to the challenges posed by its subject. Challenging that subject certainly is. Not only is reading an intimately subjective practice; as Cantier observes late in his study, it is "un acte volatile par nature" (p. 255). In fact, reading is nothing less than a mode of absolute freedom, and more akin to desire than to freedom of thought. In Alberto Manguel's words, it is "a strength that requires barely a few words to become overwhelming"; and if "the reader's vast and diverse powers" have always been "the bane of dictatorships," every society treats reading as a force to be reckoned with.[1] Printing and publishing, bookselling, criticism, libraries, education, but also censorship, expropriation, book-burning and persecution all make up what Cantier, adapting Roger Chartier's term, refers to as "l'ordre du livre": the set of social, cultural, and economic structures by means of which a given social order seeks to both stimulate and control the volatile act of reading, according to the values that define it.

As an object of study, therefore, reading itself is extremely difficult to pin down. In 1941 Maurice Blanchot declared: "Les peuples meurtris qui ne peuvent exprimer les sentiments qui les agitent se rejettent dans la lecture" (qtd. on p. 229). But although there are some statistics to support that claim, it is difficult for the historian to penetrate very far into the tormented *for intérieur* to which Blanchot refers. And even if the topic is approached indirectly, by way of the institutional framework within which reading takes place, this is far from straightforward during the period in question. As Martine Poulain says in the chapter of *Livres pillés, lectures surveillées* she entitles "Lisons sous l'Occupation": "Il reste difficile de savoir ce que lisaient les Français en l'absence d'études sociologiques ou même de statistiques de vente et de communication." [2] Poulain's solution is to call on a number of biographical accounts, and Cantier does likewise: what he describes as "la remontée vers l'intimité d'un lecteur aux mille visages" (p. 283) provides much of the substance of his study. But nothing daunted by the paucity of statistical evidence, he also confronts head on the difficulty Poulain identifies by exploring in detail the various structures and institutions within which reading is both enabled

and controlled.

There is a two-fold risk to such an approach: individual case-studies may simply proliferate in the form of discrete thumbnails, with little to link them other than the continuity provided by familiar names, while descriptions of structures and institutions may slip their moorings and allow the subject of reading to disappear beneath the horizon. Cantier's book is not immune to these risks: at times it can become something of a catalogue, and at others it is not entirely clear what it offers that is not to be found in studies of a more general nature by Pascal Fouché or Jean-Yves Mollier, each of whose works is copiously cited.^[3] Nonetheless, the sheer volume of individual testimony it draws on (the diaries and correspondence of over fifty authors are cited), and the wealth of archive material, both public and private, with which it augments what it borrows from published sources, ensure that the book makes a substantial and original contribution to knowledge of the period.

This is clear from the moment it begins. In a bold move, Cantier devotes the first quarter of his book to the period leading up to the Occupation, in order to provide an overview of the place occupied by books in twentieth-century France. By focusing in this way on the role played by the printed word in guaranteeing cultural continuity and social cohesion in “un pays qui place les lettres au cœur de son identité collective” (p. 44), he provides an indispensable context for understanding the disruptions brought about by the Occupation when it comes, but also for identifying the continuities that the period also displays. In a prologue, he brings out the contrast in the years following World War I between the literary ideal inspired by the “bourgeoisie à bibliothèques” and the harsher realities on the ground. Despite American aid in the postwar years, the number and the standards of public libraries in France were below that of other nations; the high cost of books in the 1930s made access to them difficult for many people, and in rural areas levels of reading were low. The Catholic Church on the one hand, and the Communist Party on the other, placed restrictions on the freedom of readers under their influence. The arrival of the Front Populaire altered the climate in a number of ways, not least in its encouragement of *la lecture publique*.

Chapter one homes in on the period between 1939 and 1940, when the “order of the book” came under pressure from moves to ensure public order, before enduring the shockwave of the *débâcle*. By dwelling at length on this threshold moment, Cantier reveals the major transformations that were put in place before the Occupation had even begun. Communist books were seized and pulped, and censorship was imposed more generally. The Bibliothèque Nationale began to evacuate its holdings, and during the conflict several public libraries were destroyed. Publishers set about limiting their activities and even downsizing as the economic situation worsened. The intellectual climate took a moralistic turn with a return to traditional values. In 1940, literary prizes went exclusively to writers at the front, and much attention was paid to what those in uniform were reading, though one officer replied to an inquiry in the *Figaro* to defend those conscripts who did not read, arguing that they preferred the rich life of the soldier to the decadence of modern writing.

Chapter two describes the increasing control that was exercised over the life of letters under the Occupation, and the relentless organization of censorship and control under the twin authorities of Vichy and the Nazi occupier. An intensified moralistic bias sought to curtail the pluralism that characterized prewar publishing, and encouraged works inspired by ruralist nostalgia and pro-German enthusiasm. The creation of a Comité d'organisation du livre in 1941

led to increased pressure on publishers, on schools (with a return to classical rather than modern authors), and on libraries (as Vichy sought to influence what and how people read). A project for an Institut du livre and an associated chair at the Collège de France sought to turn bookselling into a tightly controlled profession. A Commission de contrôle whose official role was to allocate paper to publishers served also as an organ of censorship.

Beginning with a poll of one hundred publishers on the subject of what French people were reading during the Occupation, chapter three embarks on a search for the reader during these *années noires*, taking account of geographical variations and exploring the different modes in which reading took place: in education, entertainment, and among children, women, prisoners of war and even deportees. Rising to the challenge posed by the lack of statistical evidence for the period, Cantier calls on a number of contemporary sources and some recent research to provide details, sometimes in table form, of the economic realities of publishing at the time, of borrowing patterns in public libraries, and of trends in what people living in large towns were reading.

In chapter four Cantier turns his attention to “literary society,” which continued to thrive under the Occupation, and seeks to establish a typology of the forms of sociability that bring professional readers together, be they writers, critics, members of *comités de lecture* and Académies, or judges for literary prizes. Chapter five begins by mapping differing approaches to reading as the regime and its opponents mobilized literature in favor of their cause. For Vichy, certain sorts of reading were held responsible for the national decline it sought to reverse, and the regime remained deeply suspicious of what reading could lead to. Gradually, a clandestine movement emerged, in which poetry played a significant role. Literature became a mode of intellectual resistance, both among certain categories of reader and in the maquis itself, where “équipes volantes” encouraged sessions of collective reading.

An epilogue examines the tensions and transformations affecting the “order of the book” as Liberation came ever closer; and in conclusion, Cantier modestly acknowledges that much remains still to be explored in the field to which he has devoted his study, while expressing the hope that his work will show up the problems of the period in a different light. On this final score his modesty is misplaced: his study opens up a rich and diverse set of perspectives on a subject of particular relevance in the case of France. If a lack is felt consistently in any area, it is in the vague and shifting nature of the categories into which he divides “le lecteur des années noires”: “grands lecteurs,” “lecteurs occasionnels,” “lecteurs éclairés,” “le lecteur bourgeois,” “l’immense public,” “le lecteur cultivé,” “le lecteur ordinaire,” “le lecteur critique”—these terms could have been more tightly and consistently defined. Perhaps, however, their vagueness merely reflects the volatile and elusive power of the individual act of reading itself, whose reality is only ever discernible in the “negative space” surrounding the complex structures it engenders.

NOTES

[1] Albert Manguel, *A History of Reading* (London: HarperCollins, 1996), pp. 281, 288, 283.

[2] Martine Poulain, *Livres pillés, lectures surveillées: Les bibliothèques françaises sous l’Occupation*, rev. ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 2013), p. 352.

[3] Pascal Fouché, *L'édition française sous l'Occupation: 1940-1944*, 2 vols. (Paris: Bibliothèque de littérature française contemporaine de l'Université Paris 7, 1987); Jean-Yves Mollier, *Édition, presse et pouvoir en France au XXe siècle* (Paris : Fayard, 2008).

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