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Elizabeth Andrews Bond, *The Writing Public. Participatory Knowledge Production in Enlightenment and Revolutionary France*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2020, pp. 272. Illustrations and appendix. \$99.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9-78-1501753565.

Review by Margaret Jacob, University of California, Los Angeles.

During the last forty years of the eighteenth-century, private societies and coteries populated by engaged readers and writers dedicated to usefulness became commonplace in the Dutch Republic, the German states, Britain, and now we know, thanks to the work of Elizabeth Andrews Bond, in France. Members of such groups, as well as simply engaged observers, sought increasingly to participate in public life. Beginning with the 1770s Bond has examined thousands of letters to the editor (over 6900), in dozens of *affiches* published in provincial towns, in places such as Aix-en-Provence, Angers, Lyon, Nantes, Toulouse, Poitou, Reims, as well as Paris, and in journals from Lyon to Provence. Some writers aimed at women, others just at the public at large. No other scholar, to my knowledge, has mined commonplace sources to such good effect.

The censors were active in overseeing all this literature, with special scrutiny for the *Journal de Paris*, and as a result the historian searches in vain for the anti-clerical or the heretical. Rather we are asked to see the Enlightenment at work in letters that praise someone as enlightened and promoting reform, and in 1789 letter writers say that all who are dedicated to the public good may be addressed as *citoyens éclairés*. These enlightened promoters advocated for improved agricultural techniques, steam engines, or electrical experiments that could be replicated. They also explained new medical treatments, extolled charitable works, and assessed novels and poetry. Aside from the anonymous letter writers, where authors can be identified we find medical doctors, lawyers, state employees like tax collectors, and remarkably, actresses who boldly self-identify. Only after 1789 did censorship break down; then the *affiches* focused increasingly on the revolution and sought to communicate its unfolding.

The actresses remind this reviewer of the French-speaking troupe in The Hague that in 1751 were sisters in one of the first masonic lodges for women anywhere in Europe.<sup>[1]</sup> There too they boldly spoke about the equality of brothers and sisters and evinced no embarrassment about an imagined inferiority, the prejudice so often directed at them. In addition, if ever we doubted the emotional impact of novels, read the accounts written to the editor (pp. 75-77) where writers clearly expect a sympathetic audience for an emotional state being candidly revealed. The history of emotions can be augmented by turning to the responses to popular novels, now being told to a public assumed to be interested. Likewise, the letters speak emotionally about the impact of Rousseau or Richardson's *Clarissa*. The effect was a heightened response to the needs of others

that, it has been wisely suggested, could translate into impulses for political reform and human rights. The letters also demonstrate the high name recognition awarded to Voltaire. They further document the belief of the founder of French psychiatry, Philippe Pinel, that prior to the revolution French society had been in decay, and after 1789 gradually both body and soul were invigorated and reanimated.

This book further expands upon the democratizing tendency found in Enlightenment historiography of the last twenty or more years, in both English and French. Combined with Jeremy Caradonna on academic prize contests, Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire on freemasonry, and Paola Bertucci on artisans, Elizabeth Andrews Bond has taken us well beyond the twenty or so great philosophes that once dominated the historiography. Now we can learn about the thinking of a wide selection of the literate, their reading habits, their expectation of being taken seriously, and their ability to give criticism of books by authors widely read and cited internationally. In addition, the letters to the editor provide evidence for the expansion of French literacy into the working classes including domestic servants. An amazing appendix lists all the journals and literary works cited in the letters.

*The Writing Public* also makes shrewd observations on the power of the French public, and by mid-1789, on its ability to turn its attention to politics, take sides, and glory in the new press freedom. The letters to the editors signal that over several decades readers had come to expect “a space where their opinions would be heard” and where they should encounter honesty and impartiality (pp. 171–172). Deputies to the Constituent Assembly used the *affiches* to explain their positions, combat rumors, and answer questions directed to them by other letter writers. Clergy wrote to explain how the constitutional oath would affect them; others wrote to demand full rights of citizenship for Jews; all display a remarkable self-confidence and an optimism “about the human capacity to modify the sciences and society” (p. 177). Bond successfully knits together the pre-revolutionary decades with the early 1790s, when “habits of mind that writers had forged in the *affiches* were applied in new sites to implement practical, social, and political changes” (p. 178).

Not least, Bond documents the importance of social reading, a culture of reading out loud to others and being read to, often at evening gatherings. The practice was commonplace in parts of Europe until well after the Second World War. It was particularly strong among reformers at the periphery needing to know the extent of social and political changes emanating from the center. The public demonstration of literacy lessened the gender gap, and further facilitated listener participation, however vicarious, in the empirical work of scientific practitioners from ballooning to electricity and chemistry. Every provincial town wanted its own scientific practitioners and the local academies promoted enquiry into natural philosophy; in addition, their essay prizes helped to launch the careers of savants like Rousseau, the Abbé Grégoire, Lavoisier, and Marat. Like the *affiches*, the essay competitions “were concerned with improvement that relied on expertise in engineering, medicine, or natural philosophy” (p. 95). Amateurs vied with experts to prove that their efforts with electrical experiments were just as important, and “discussions of electricity characterized the optimism of the age” (p. 109). At the cost of a little more than six or seven livres, annual subscribers could receive a weekly *affiche*. Bond reinforces the argument, also found in the work of James Delbourgo, that mastery over nature implied the ability to master the dilemmas and injustices that plagued the human condition.<sup>[2]</sup>

Some attention to other parts of Western Europe and to the American colonies would have enriched a book that makes an important mark in French Enlightenment historiography. Literacy rates were even higher in the Dutch Republic where contemporary histories of the book have examined the archives of book dealers to find who was buying what. We also now know more about the routes and subterfuges used to get books past the French censors and police. Books could be dragged over Alpine hills; they could also be sent through the post with willing postmasters ready to cover over their transit from Amsterdam, through Brussels to Paris.

Comparative and international work across state boundaries may yet be produced by this talented historian. This is a remarkably well researched account of the French reading public. Bond's next contribution should rise above the limits of the national, especially for the time when French so easily crossed the borders of one nation. We can only await such a contribution and welcome it.

#### NOTES

[1] See Margaret C. Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), chapter 5.

[2] James Delbourgo, *A Most Amazing Scene of Wonders. Electricity and Enlightenment in Early America* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 2006).

Margaret C. Jacob  
University of California, Los Angeles  
[mjacob@history.ucla.edu](mailto:mjacob@history.ucla.edu)

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