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Françoise Bigot du Mesnil du Buisson, *Portraits d'un sans-culotte*. Préface by Philippe Bourdin. Chamalières, France: Lemme Édit, 2022. v+217 pp. Table, figures, notes, and annexes. €19.00 (pb). ISBN 9-78-2492818028.

Review by Heather Belnap, Brigham Young University.

In 1987, the family of historian and psychoanalyst Françoise Bigot du Mesnil du Buisson (1934–2020) donated a portrait of an unknown sitter to the Louvre. Intrigued by the myriad unknowns posed by this painting, Bigot set out to recover the histories of this family heirloom. After several decades of gleaning information from archival, genealogical, and institutional sources, Bigot pieced together these historical fragments about the identities of the artist and more importantly, the subject of this painting, to compose a scholarly biography of Claude Louis Lecomte, an ordinary man coming of age in the extraordinary era of the French Revolution. *Portraits d'un sans-culotte* therefore offers a microhistory of a seemingly anomalous *sans-culotte*: a revolutionary who wasn't radical or militant and who wasn't from the popular classes, a new kind of man—educated, urban, and civically minded—emerging in the last decades of the eighteenth century.

The first chapter of the book, “Prélude à une enquête, ‘Portraits de Mons Le Comte par David,’” frames the book as a kind of detective story and holds out the promise of grounding the project in the visual, material artifact that catalyzed the project. Alas, this book will frustrate art historians. In a scant eight pages, the author describes the painting that family lore attributed to Jacques-Louis David (a claim now discounted) and reproduces its entry in Joconde (the database of artworks in French national collections). No comparisons are drawn to other portraits of the era, and there is no engagement with any scholarship on Revolutionary portraiture. Bigot's project would have benefited immensely by delving into such studies, which provide comparative images and analyses of the genre's significance at this historical juncture and underscore that images are texts requiring the same degree of deciphering and interpretation accorded to a written historical document.[1]

The next few chapters sketch out Lecomte's early years and professional and marital life, providing the general contours of a man becoming equipped to assume the role of a revolutionary. Born in the 1st arrondissement of Paris in 1764 to parents working as domestics in the household of a wealthy widow, Claude Louis Lecomte ultimately became the beneficiary of her largesse. With the means to gain an education at once classical and enlightened and to set up his own business in the iron industry by age twenty-six, Lecomte was afforded the kind of socioeconomic ascension available to few. Between 1788 and 1792, he married Élisabeth Madeleine Mussard from Versailles and purchased a home on rue Tarenne (off the Boulevard Saint-Germain in the

6th). By the end of that decade, he had fathered two sons. From what Bigot could glean from records about his personal and professional life, Lecomte thus enjoyed a bourgeois mode of life.

The bulk of *Portraits d'un sans-culotte*, however, is focused on the figure Lecomte cut in the political arena. His public engagement with republicanism and contributions to the Revolution were not insignificant. In 1790, he founded one of the first political clubs in Paris, La Société des Jeunes Amis de la Liberté. In the following year, he published a speech he had given, "*Adresse de la Société des jeunes Amis de la liberté à leurs concitoyens, et à toutes les sociétés patriotiques des 83 départemens*," which is reproduced, along with all of his other known texts, in an appendix at the end of the volume. Lecomte and the club over which he presided also became affiliated with the Jacobins in 1791, and he joined his voice to those calling for the election of Robespierre. Given his background as a community leader with long-held republican convictions, Lecomte's political responsibilities expanded. He was appointed Commissaire civil des Quatres-Nations, elected to the Conseil général de la Commune de Paris in August of 1792, and was a deputy at the Convention the following month. He assumed several other roles in the First Republic, including serving on the Comité du Salut Public and overseeing military transports. In September 1794, Lecomte delivered a lengthy speech at the Temple de la Morale in Chaumont. During the Directory, he worked as the office head of the Palais du Luxembourg from 1796 to 1798.

Bigot pursues the question of his participation in the more unsavory acts committed in the name of the Republic and finds records confirming his hand in some of these, including the September 1792 massacre near the Abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. She discovered a report Lecomte authored on the massacre that included an inventory of the personal effects taken from the victims' bodies, as he was responsible for depositing these into one of the city's *chambres aux trésors*. She also found a number of vouchers he signed providing provisions for the violent sans-culottes (pp. 89-90), and discovered that in 1795, he was called upon to testify about the events now known as the September Massacres. After the Revolution, however, the trail of archival breadcrumbs related to Claude Louis Lecomte begins petering out, and while there are records of his divorce from his first wife in 1798, his second marriage in 1800 to Marie Thérèse Auvray, and the birth of his daughter Louise Clotilde Lecomte in 1807, not another trace remains. Bigot does her best to determine when he passed away, but all that can be said conclusively is that he died after 1807 and before 1831.

Portraits d'un sans-culotte was published posthumously, and this may be the reason that it seems incomplete, begging several questions. How did Bigot imagine the final product? Did she plan on discussing the project's genesis or recounting the research process in an introduction? Did she intend to create a more solid armature to the text, or did she see the episodic structure of the book as the appropriate formal match for the irregularity of Lecomte's presence in the historical record? An explanatory note from the editor on the status of the manuscript prior to the author's passing and what adjustments were made posthumously would have been helpful. There is a lengthy preface in the work by Philippe Bourdin that provides a theoretical framing and articulation of the broader significance of this undertaking that is lacking in the text. The explication and endorsement of *Portraits d'un sans-culotte* by a respected scholar of the French Revolution such as Bourdin is critical to lending credibility to the publication. Yet, arguing for the importance of such scholarship, i.e., a focused study of an individual lost to history, he perhaps oversells its value.

Indeed, in many ways, it seems as if *Portraits d'un sans-culotte* were produced in—or perhaps for—another time. It is likely that Bigot embarked on this microhistory sometime around the donation of this family painting to the Louvre in 1987 and then worked on it up to her death in 2020. Had the work been published during the birth of the history of the overlooked, the era of Natalie Zemon Davis's *Return of Martin Guerre* (1983) and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's *A Midwife's Tale* (1991), it might be more deserving of Bourdin's accolades.^[2] Few historians today would dispute the importance of such scholarship to expanding and nuancing our characterizations. And perhaps this American historian overestimates the significant ways Revolutionary scholars outside of France have shaped and continue to shape the field, especially since the bicentennial, but it was disappointing not to find any references to publications written in English in Bigot's text.

That said, the assiduousness with which Françoise Bigot du Mesnil du Buisson pursued her project to return Claude Louis Lecomte to the annals of the Revolutionary era deserves commendation. Historians of the Revolution, and especially those interested in the *sans-culottes*, will be interested in her research. The appendixes reproducing the texts authored by Lecomte listing the primary source material on the Société des Jeunes Amis de la Liberté she consulted and providing the provenance of Lecomte's painted portrait, are noteworthy. Furthermore, *Portraits d'un sans-culotte* reminds us, lest we have forgotten, of the value of individual stories that not only illuminate large-scale political, socioeconomic, and cultural developments, but also personalize the French Revolution, an epoch prone to being viewed as so much larger than life that it can seem almost fictitious.

NOTES

[1] Some examples of such scholarship are Amy Freund, *Portraiture and Politics in Revolutionary France* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Park, 2014); *Citizens and Kings: Portraits in the Age of Revolution, 1760-1830*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2007); Margaret A. Oppenheimer, *The French Portrait: Revolution to Restoration* (Northampton, MA: Smith College Museum of Art, 2005); Tony Halliday, *Facing the public: Portraiture in the aftermath of the French Revolution* (New York: Manchester University Park, 1999).

[2] Natalie Zemon Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983) and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

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