

---

H-France Review Vol. 24 (January 2024), No. 10

John Hardman, *Barnave: The Revolutionary who Lost his Head for Marie-Antoinette*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2023. xv + 394 pp. Notes, references, index, and 24 illustrations. \$40.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780300270846. \$40.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9780300272185.

Response by John Hardman, independent scholar.

I feel I owe it to my subject if not to myself to make a reply to Professor Popkin's review. Thus 2024 will get off to a rousing start just as 2023 did with Annie Jourdan's measured response to Popkin's review of her own book in the January 2023 edition of *H-France Review*.<sup>[1]</sup> Beyond addressing individual points, lies a more important one. For it seems to me that a kind of history is under attack, one that is not to Professor Popkin's taste.

Common to both reviews is a denigration of what Professor Popkin dismisses as "high politics."<sup>[2]</sup> What is wrong with just politics? Allied to this is another reservation about conventional biography—"Not surprisingly, in view of Hardman's previous authorship of biographies of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette"—as opposed to "new biography" based on "three modes—as window, as agent, and as symbol." I confess that it would have been difficult to confine my findings from pages of manuscript into such an aperture. Rather I had hoped to place these discoveries in the public domain. I think that this approach has more lasting value and indeed a wider audience than some of the new genres that thrive in restricted academic circles. But all have a place in History.

I am indeed a political historian, but as readers are probably aware, I have not confined my studies to biographies however defined, having published documentary collections, co-edited the unpublished Louis XVI-Vergennes correspondence, two analytical works on the structure of politics at the end of the Ancien Régime and on the 1787 Assembly of Notables, and a biography of Robespierre with original sections on his political patronage and work at the police bureau.<sup>[3]</sup> I have tried to integrate these two methodologies in the political history of the Revolution I am currently writing.

Like it or not, my biographies are the fruit of a deep familiarity with the field of revolutionary politics, and the choice of a conventional biography for Barnave suited my purpose. I felt I had a certain number of observations and analyses to put before scholars that further our understanding of this important revolutionary, his ideological contribution, and his theory of history.

In view of this I did hope that the reader would acknowledge my analysis of Barnave's political thought, which Popkin seems somehow to have missed. He writes: "Despite his mention of the importance of Barnave's *Introduction to the French Revolution*, Hardman also has nothing to say about him as a political thinker or a historian." The sections were not lost on another reviewer, John Adamson, who found them to be the best part of the book.[4] In fact, throughout the body of the book I make constant reference to the application of Barnave's theory of "the force of things." In particular on pages twenty-five to twenty-nine I show how Barnave developed his theory of historical change at the youthful age of twenty-one in his allocution to the parlement of Grenoble, a point not previously discussed. And chapter two, "The Origins of the French Revolution According to Barnave," is throughout the application of Barnave's theories to this subject.

Popkin's view is that "The greatest weakness of the book, however, is its failure to take into consideration the broader context surrounding its protagonist." Leaving aside the impossible length of a "life and times biography," and the risk of drowning the new discoveries in the context, what might this "broader context" be? All Popkin instances is my supposedly not addressing Timothy Tackett's view that Varennes "did fatal damage to the king's authority." I beg to differ on that context, and actually make the nuanced point that the king's flight polarized opinion and this is illustrated both by the Champ de mars demonstration and by the fact that it was snuffed out. The National Guard moved from opposing the king (at the time of the Saint-Cloud departure) to defending him. The Assembly then tried to revise the constitution along the lines the king indicated in the manifesto he left on the desk when he fled, which I had included in a book of documents for its importance.[5]

The centre moved right and the left moved towards republicanism. My contextual point is that the regime was brought down not by the flight to Varennes, but by the Girondins' war-mongering and obliging the king to use his veto against priests and émigrés. I would also add that Tackett accepts my long-contested conclusion that when he left Paris the king was not seeking to emigrate but to reach Montmédy in Lorraine.[6] If the king had been trying to emigrate Barnave confessed that he would have been unable to save his throne let alone modify the constitution in light of his manifesto.

My book would no doubt have benefited from referencing Popkin's work on the Haitian Revolution but I thought that my best contribution to this recently well-trodden field would be simply to publish what I had found of Barnave's views on the subject in his private papers, for example that he originally thought that the colonial assemblies should be organized "without distinction of colour" but then changed tack.

Professor Popkin writes: "Hardman also dismisses the importance of the letters the queen wrote secretly to the Austrian ambassador Mercy d'Argenteau [sic for Mercy-Argenteau] in which she asserted that the king's acceptance of the 1791 constitution and her willingness to work with figures like Barnave was merely a deceptive maneuver". Marie-Antoinette's letters to Mercy-Argenteau need to be set in context. She and Barnave, like any politician, had to play to different audiences. Both were aware of the risks they ran; both needed a backstop if things went wrong; but both were determined to make a go of it whilst they still thought it possible.

I made it clear that there was an element of deception by both Barnave and Marie-Antoinette: he exaggerating the chances of success; and both hedging against failure. Marie-Antoinette told

Barnave frankly of her doubts: “With what,” she asked, prophetically, “can we repress the anarchy which is erupting everywhere with renewed vigour? With the law? But it is nothing without force and does that exist? The same argument can be applied to the next legislature. Despite the decrees, the Constitution and the oaths, who can guarantee that it will not want to change everything and that the republican party will not regain the upper hand? If that happens, where is the force to prevent it? I would not have these anxieties were it not that the next legislature is about to open.”

Their very consciousness of the risks they ran made it difficult for Barnave and Marie-Antoinette to have become lovers. I did not dismiss “out of hand” the rumours that they had an affair but merely draw attention to the documented fact that they had few meetings and conducted most of their interactions by letter. Barnave was terrified of being detected. This is why they had to rule the country by letter.

Popkin writes: “Hardman claims [sic] that he [Barnave] developed close ties with Danton”. The evidence for this is irrefutable--e.g. Barnave warned Danton to get out of Paris before the Champ de mars incident. The links between Barnave and Danton were established by Norman Hampson in his definitive biography of the latter.[7] I have merely published additional information on the links and shown how Barnave exploited them to put pressure on the National Assembly.

## NOTES

[1] Annie Jourdan, *H-France Review* vol. 23 (January 2023), no. 2. <https://h-france.net/vol23reviews/vol23no2jourdan.pdf>.

[2] Jeremy D. Popkin, *H-France Review* vol. 23 (January 2023), no. 1. <https://h-france.net/vol23reviews/vol23no1popkin.pdf>.

[3] *Louis XVI and the comte de Vergennes: correspondance, 1774-1787*, ed. John Hardman and Munro Price (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1998); John Hardman, *French Politics, 1774-1789: From the accession of Louis XVI to the fall of the Bastille* (London: Longman, 1995); John Hardman, *Overture to Revolution: The 1787 Assembly of Notables and the Crisis of France's Old Regime* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); John Hardman, *Robespierre* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

[4] John Adamson, “Reluctant Monarchist,” *Literary Review* (June 2023).

[5] John Hardman, *The French Revolution Sourcebook* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 1999), pp. 128-136.

[6] Timothy Tackett, *When the King Took Flight* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

[7] Norman Hampson, *Danton* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1978).

John Hardman  
Independent scholar  
[johnhardman1789@gmail.com](mailto:johnhardman1789@gmail.com)

Copyright © 2024 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172