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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.

Review by Jeremy D. Popkin, University of Kentucky.

As John Hardman remarks at the outset of his biography of Antoine Barnave, it is remarkable that a figure so prominent in the history of the French Revolution has not been the subject of a thorough study for over a century, since the publication of E.D. Bradby's *Life of Barnave* in 1915.[1] Bradby's work remains impressive in many ways, but, as Hardman says, the fact that she considered the published letters between Barnave and Marie-Antoinette as forgeries meant that she failed to acknowledge a crucial aspect of her subject's career. As the subtitle of his book suggests, Hardman considers Barnave's collaboration with the queen in the months after the royal family's failed flight to Varennes the most significant element of his role in the Revolution, and the one that led to his execution in 1793. In addition to the importance of Barnave's role in attempting to save the monarchy in 1791-1792, Hardman underlines the importance of his political activity during the early phases of the Revolution and the influence of the posthumous publication of his history of the movement, often regarded as the first account to interpret the events of 1789 in terms of class conflict.

Hardman's approach to biography is closer to Bradby's than to that of the "new biography" exemplified, for example, by Alyssa Sepinwall's *The Abbé Grégoire and the French Revolution*. As Sepinwall says, she sought to analyze her subject "in three modes--as window, as agent, and as symbol."[2] He concentrates almost exclusively on Barnave's political engagements. Chapter eight, *Barnave's Private Life*--containing sections dealing with "Barnave and Women," "Mother and Son," "Financing a Lifestyle," and "Barnave the Hypochondriac"--seems unconnected to the rest of the narrative. Unlike Peter McPhee, who offered some new insights into Robespierre's character by examining his relations with women, Hardman seems as unable to understand that aspect of his protagonist's life as readers will be after reading the evidence he presents.[3] 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.[4]

Barnave's notorious dismissal of the crowd violence that followed the storming of the Bastille--"is the blood which has just flowed all that pure?"--has given him an undeserved reputation as a radical (p. 111). He was indeed, Hardman maintains, a man who arrived in 1789 already persuaded that France's absolute monarchy and its elaborate social hierarchy needed important changes, but the revolution he sought to make was in many respects a conservative one. Barnave

wanted, in Hardman's words, "to pull the Third Estate up, not pull the nobility down," and he had little concern for the common people (p. 83). The son of a bourgeois father and a mother from a noble family, Barnave epitomized the mixed elite of "notables" that the revisionist historians of the French Revolution in the 1980s saw emerging in the last decades of the old regime. Hardman emphasizes the resentment of social snobbery that he inherited from his mother, disdained by other nobles after her marriage, and the family's Protestantism posed another obstacle to whatever ambitions he may have conceived before 1789 (pp. 13-14, 22-23). It is not surprising that, along with Joseph Mounier, a somewhat older local lawyer, he threw himself into the provincial revolutionary movement in his native province of Dauphiné in 1788 and then won election as a deputy for the Third Estate.

Hardman takes a sympathetic view of his subject, although he admits that he made some serious errors of political judgment, such as supporting the decree abolishing the nobility in 1790. One of the youngest members of the National Assembly, Barnave had a reputation, which Hardman considers exaggerated, as a brilliant orator. He was essentially a parliamentary politician, although Hardman claims that he developed close ties with Danton and was able to work behind the scenes to organize popular pressure in favor of his goals when he needed to. By late 1789, if not earlier, Barnave had joined forces with Adrien Duport and Alexandre Lameth, forming a "triumvirate" that would turn the Jacobin club into a powerful political force. Hardman regards Barnave's role in the club as his "most original contribution to the Revolution, perhaps his only truly original one" (p. 173). He was nevertheless unable to unite those who largely shared his views about the need for a constitutional monarchy in which the king would enjoy significant powers. His ambitions often put him at odds with Mirabeau, and he and Lafayette vigorously disliked each other. By the end of 1790, Barnave had already lost much of the influence he had enjoyed earlier in the year.

Bradby concluded that "it was over the colonial question that Barnave threw away his popularity and faced obloquy."[5] Hardman is aware of the significance of Barnave's decision to make himself the most prominent defender of the slaveholding colonists' interests, a decision whose motives remain unclear since he had no obvious connection to the colonial world, unlike his friend Charles Lameth, Alexandre's brother, who owned a large plantation in Saint-Domingue. In contrast to Bradby, however, Hardman states that he deliberately decided not to engage at length with Barnave's role in the debates on colonial issues, on which, he says, "the historiography...is vast" (p. 164). This decision is regrettable, since it was Barnave's protection of the white colonists that allowed his enemy Brissot to destroy his reputation. Had Hardman made use of the minutes of the National Assembly's Colonial Committee, which Barnave chaired and which were published in 1927, he could have given an interesting picture of Barnave at work, striving earnestly, with limited success, to reconcile the demands of the intransigent planters and his own vision of a colonial empire firmly governed from the metropole.[6]

Not surprisingly, in view of Hardman's previous authorship of biographies of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette, the chapters on Barnave's involvement with the queen in the months following the royal couple's failed attempt to flee the capital are among the most detailed in the book.[7] Dismissing out of hand the rumors that Barnave had an affair with the queen--according to Hardman's account, they had only a few meetings and conducted most of their interactions by letter--Hardman also dismisses the importance of the letters the queen wrote secretly to the Austrian ambassador Mercy d'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: "Il ne s'agit pour nous que de les endormir et de leur donner confiance en nous pour les mieux déjouer après."[8] Revisiting the story of Barnave's efforts to save the monarchy through his relationship with the queen from Barnave's perspective might have given Hardman an opportunity to take a fresh look at the critical question of whether the constitutional monarchy could have been preserved, and whether, as he claims, there had ever been a serious "chance that Barnave, through Marie-Antoinette's agency, could reconcile Europe to the Revolution by the establishment of a stable constitutional monarchy" (p. 348). As readers familiar with Hardman's Marie-Antoinette biography will discover, however, many passages in this chapter of his *Barnave* are reprinted almost verbatim from his earlier book, and thus offer no new insights.[9]

There is certainly room for serious scholarship on the moderate politicians of the French Revolution, and the question of whether the constitution hammered out with so much effort in 1789-1791 could have been made to work, as Barnave so devoutly hoped, will always remain a crucial one. Nevertheless, Hardman's biography is ultimately unconvincing on this point. Hardman is not a good explainer, and it is often difficult to follow the details of his narrative. Pages 147 to 155, headed "Barnave and Necker" but in fact dealing with maneuvers to drive Necker from office, are an example. The greatest weakness of the book, however, is its failure to take into consideration the broader context surrounding its protagonist. Timothy Tackett, with whom Hardman tangles at several points in his narrative, has made a persuasive case that the flight to Varennes, viewed by much of the population as a betrayal of the solemn promise Louis XVI had made to accept the new constitution, did fatal damage to the king's authority.[10] The royal family's double game after Varennes--claiming loyalty to the constitution while continuing to encourage foreign powers to put pressure on the revolutionaries--was a high-wire act with every chance of leading to catastrophe. Barnave was undoubtedly sincere in his striving to establish a constitutional monarchy that would consolidate the position of the king and of men of talent like himself, but it remains unclear whether either the royal couple or the majority of the French population were prepared to accept such an outcome by 1791.

NOTES

[1] E.D. Bradby, *The Life of Barnave*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1915).

[2] Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, *The Abbé Grégoire and the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 6.

[3] Peter McPhee, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2012).

[4] See *Power, Property, and History: Joseph Barnave's Introduction to the French Revolution and Other Writings*, trans. and ed. Emanuel Chill (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).

[5] Bradby, *Barnave*, 1: 315.

[6] Henri Joucla, *Le Conseil supérieur des colonies et ses antécédents* (Paris: Editions du monde moderne, 1927).

[7] John Hardman, *Louis XVI* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993) and *Marie-Antoinette: The Making of a French Queen* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2019).

[8] Marie-Antoinette to Mercy d'Argenteau, August 26, 1791, in *Correspondance de Marie-Antoinette (1770-1793)*, ed. Evelyne Lever (Paris: Tallandier, 2005), p. 585.

[9] For example, compare Hardman, *Barnave*, pp. 280-281, four paragraphs beginning "Another difficulty concerned the uniform of the new guard" and ending "it was unlikely he had been so stupid. Indeed," with Hardman, *Marie-Antoinette*, pp. 249-250, paragraphs beginning "The only difficulty..." and ending with "Indeed." For similar examples, compare *Barnave*, pp. 285-286 with *Marie-Antoinette*, pp. 247-248, and *Barnave*, pp. 290-291, with *Marie-Antoinette*, pp. 250-251.

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

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