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David A. Bell and Colin Jones, eds., *French Revolutionary Lives*. London: Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2024. ix + 249 pp. Notes, references, and index. $159.99 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9783031605246; $119.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9783031605222.

Review by Laura Mason, Johns Hopkins University.

Thomas Dodman and Rebecca Spang, contributors to the terrific *French Revolutionary Lives*, remind us that "revolutions are, by definition, moments when the anonymous make themselves known" (p. 140). They and their fellow contributors build on the revolutionary project of empowering the anonymous by retrieving the lives of some of them. With innovative research and novel conceptual frames, these historians identify myriad ways by which "the great political, social, cultural and religious transformations of the [revolutionary] era were refracted through the prism of individual experience" (p. 3). In so doing, the authors encourage us to think afresh about the micro of individual lives in order to see the macro of the French Revolution as a mosaic rather than a uniform event.

There is much to be said about how excavating particular and largely unknown lives can advance history and revolutionary studies in our own very troubling present. But let me first describe the essays themselves, for how the authors situate their historical subjects and what broader lessons they draw from individual experience gives a sense of the imaginative scope of *French Revolutionary Lives*.

The most novel subjects of the collection are the people of color who appear in essays by Christy Pichichero, Miranda Spieler, and Rahul Markovits. Christy Pichichero and Miranda Spieler write about Black metropolitans whose social standing could hardly have been more different. The Chevalier Saint-George--Pichichero's subject--was a free man of color born in Guadeloupe and renowned in the late eighteenth century as a fencer, violinist, and composer. Spieler's subject is a nameless girl brought from Senegal to spend most of her short life in Paris, where she died in obscurity in 1799, only to be taken possession of in fiction by Claire de Duras in her 1823 novel, *Ourika*. Pichichero and Spieler offer important details about the lives of both of their subjects, but their essays are ultimately about the inability of white contemporaries to see either as fully human. Pichichero makes visible how accounts of Saint-George's achievements were infused with racism, inflecting how we ought to understand eighteenth-century celebrity and possibly explaining the Chevalier's downfall during the French Revolution. The experiences and achievements of the girl who would be remembered as "Ourika" are almost impossible to grasp, for, as Spieler argues, her enslavers--most especially the Chevalier de Bouffliers, who brought

her to Paris--reduced her and others like her to objects that did not just enhance their wealth but also served their cultural and emotional aspirations.

Rahul Markovits' essay about Ahmad Khan, a Muslim who lived in France at the height of the Revolution, warns against globalizing the French Revolution without sufficiently attending to linguistic and cultural difference.[1] Comparing French versions of Khan's writing with the Persian originals, Markovits explains how translator Pierre-Marie Ruffin interpolated phrases that cast Khan as a timeless "Oriental" and cemented his status as a revolutionary ally. By foregrounding lives that once lingered at the margins of French history, Pichichero, Spieler, and Markovitz explain how colonialism, race, slavery, and cultural difference infused metropolitan culture even before the Revolution. Accordingly, their essays implicitly raise the question of whether we ought to continue to ask if the French Revolution was shaped by "inward influences" or if we should simply accept--*pace* Patrick Boucheron, Stephane Gerson, and others--that such influence was always already present.[2]

Emma Rothschild, Thomas Dodman, and Rebecca Spang set their sights on more traditional metropolitan figures to whom they bring fresh vision by prioritizing their subjects' status as economic beings. Rothschild explores the lives of three Angoulême cousins who were part of the extended family she first charted in *An Infinite History*. Her chapter is as much methodological treatise as historical narrative because it explains how much we can learn about those who did not leave letters, diaries, or speeches by tracing their economic activities and civil status. Using old-regime parish registers, revolutionary civil records, and accounts of property transactions, Rothschild describes the cousins' networks, life events, and changing fortunes. Although, she explains, there is "nothing at all of [the cousins'] feelings or political ideas," the painstakingly gathered facts of their economic and civil existence illuminate how the Revolution touched even ordinary folk living far from Paris (p. 195). Thomas Dodman and Rebecca L. Spang take a different approach, using economic history not to compensate for absent letters or diaries but better to plumb what remains. Dodman and Spang's analysis of ideas about money and property, as elaborated by revolutionary soldier Gabriel Noël in letters to his family, illuminates shifts in Noël's thinking about commerce, virtue, citizenship, and revolutionary government across the revolutionary decade.

Christine Haynes and Colin Jones add new dimensions to our growing knowledge of women's revolutionary experience. Haynes situates Ursule Lamarque within a family network that stretched between Saint-Sever (Landes), Paris, and St. Lucia, underscoring the emotional labor by which Ursule and her male relatives held together family and community in a polarizing world. Haynes situates her family biography among recent works on emotions, the revolutionary quotidian, and French letter writing, but she might also have engaged tellingly with histories of the American Civil War, which pioneered the exploration of how politics fractured and reconstituted families.[3] Colin Jones' subject is the duchesse d'Elbeuf, a hostile witness to the Revolution whose rich correspondence traced her shifting sense of revolution from 1788 to 1794. D'Elbeuf's letters make visible the elaboration of a conservative viewpoint later formalized by theorists like Bonald and de Maistre, but they are still more interesting for what they reveal about the author's sense of time. Unlike revolutionaries studied by Lynn Hunt and Reinhart Koselleck, who experienced the Revolution as a period of temporal acceleration, d'Elbeuf understood time to decelerate and even suspend itself entirely. Her perception, Jones concludes, suggests how

much more varied and dynamic were revolutionary "spaces of experience" than we might previously have thought (p.175).

Timothy Tackett and Jeff Horn focus on different moments in the lives of lesser-known Jacobins, Tackett asking what may have encouraged his subject to adopt radical opinions, while Horn looks at the fallout of radical activism. Tackett's chapter on the modest Parisian printer Nicolas Ruault suggests that family tensions, religious convictions, and intellectual tastes played a part in shaping his political ideas, but "how [he] came to join the Jacobin Club is not entirely clear" (p. 116). This essay appears to be a new installment in Tackett's extraordinary project to chart the lives of revolutionaries near to but not among the "greats" of more traditional narratives, and so is less a summary of the subject's life than a promise of more to come. Jeff Horn's return to small-town Jacobin Alexandre Rousselin uses a detailed account of legal battles, libelles, and slander between Rousselin and his political opponents to explain how vengeance was enacted in a relatively peaceful region of France after Thermidor. Horn makes clear that vengeance was not geographically uniform, but he might have deepened his analysis by acknowledging that it did more than express emotion. A fuller account of revolutionary history could make visible how the battle between Rousselin and his enemies--republicans all, as Horn notes--fit into the ruthless reconstitution of social and political hierarchy after Thermidor that ultimately made a count of the former Jacobin Rousselin.

Keith Baker's essay on Jean-Paul Marat and David Bell's linking of Tocqueville and Napoleon are gems of intellectual history. Baker analyzes Marat's ideas about sovereignty, equality, and political representation in 1789, the year that ended with Marat naming himself "l'ami du peuple." David Bell argues that Tocqueville's reflection on Napoleon reveals tensions in the writer's thinking about aristocratic and democratic kinds of biography. But, however thoughtful and gracefully written, these essays appear out of place in *French Revolutionary Lives* because neither contains the novel approaches or textured depiction of less-familiar lives that distinguish the rest of the collection.

I have lingered over the subjects of each essay in *French Revolutionary Lives* to give some sense of their riches: they reveal new dimensions of the French Revolution and offer pithy introductions to new biographical methods for the whole early modern period. As a collection, this book joins a rapidly expanding field that uses individual lives to explore the upheaval of the late eighteenth century.[4] Focusing on "people acting politically and…from the vista of their own location," is integral to what Sarah Knott has called the "situational narrative," which toggles between scales to emphasize local and international over national contexts and attend to individual behaviors rather than texts or ideologies.[5] It is an apt description of the essays reviewed here, which highlight how politics and ideology touched individual lives and how seemingly intimate choices help us better understand the vast geographical and temporal spaces of the age of revolutions. *Revolutionary Lives* will serve scholars seeking new paths through an era that we know to have been more dynamic, more heterogeneous, and more replete with challenges from below and from abroad than once thought. It will nourish students grappling with how and why the French Revolution matters by making visible how the event reached beyond its abstract and often unfulfilled promises of universal liberty, equality, and fraternity.

Knott also said of situational narratives that their authors tended to be more interested in "contributing to present knowledge than…affecting future politics," labeling this "history writing for neoliberal times." [6] But neoliberal times are gone, and we can no longer afford the kind of internalism that Knott identified. As universities and the democratic polities they are supposed to serve enter a crisis we may not survive, we must ask how we, as historians, can speak to a wider public. More pointedly, how can the revolutionists among us make visible the achievements, costs, and disappointments of the battle for political and social equality that began in the late eighteenth century? *French Revolutionary Lives* may help light a way forward.

Ta-Nehisi Coates recently made a potent case for the power of writing--and writing good stories above all--to challenge systems of power. He sustained that case by describing turning points in his own life and in the lives of others.[7] We ought to take Coates' method seriously. To follow his lead in formulating good stories that advance emancipation is not to abandon the critical apparatus of History, nor is it to deny the strange particularity of the past. It is rather to reflect on how we might make our analytic strengths more useful by making them more accessible. This is not a new project. It has long been the practice of historians of class, gender, race, and indigeneity who challenge mythologies of the past in order to challenge injustice in the present. More traditional Europeanists might join this project by writing or teaching histories like those contained in *French Revolutionary Lives*.

Biography is a remarkable instrument of accessibility because it gives readers something like a plot--the intimate unfolding of one or several lives--that can be contextualized historically and which inevitably offers room for broader analysis or reflection. Admittedly, most of the essays gathered in *Revolutionary Lives* speak principally to academics and their students, but they are rich with suggestions about how to excavate, describe, and interpret the activity of ordinary people. And they lay ample ground for deepened reflection on the present by explaining how historical actors navigated racism, cultural difference, polarization, and sheer hatred in the age of revolutions. After all, it is worth recalling, it was the "age of revolutions" that gave birth to the democracies we fight to improve and, I write with no small measure of pain and regret, merely to preserve.

French Revolutionary Lives advances the vast project of identifying links and discontinuities between past and present with compelling arguments about how abstractions bandied about by the powerful touched ordinary people. In other words, *Revolutionary Lives* underscores just how much politics matter. It is a book for the desk and the classroom, and perhaps also for the bedside table, as we reflect on how to restore the best of the revolutionary past to the present.

LIST OF ESSAYS

David A. Bell, Colin Jones, "Introduction."

Christy Pichichero, "Race, Revolution, and Celebrity: The Case of Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-George"

Miranda Spieler, "Ourika and the Chevalier de Boufflers"

Keith Michael Baker, "The Revolutionary Rebirth of Jean-Paul Marat"

Christine Haynes, "Navigating the Emotional Storm of 1791: The Lamarque Family in Paris, the Landes, and Saint Lucia"

Timothy Tackett, "A Jacobin Itinerary: The Biography of a Parisian Printer"

Rahul Markovits, "A 'Muslim Jacobin'? Ahmad Khan and the Eurocentric Pitfalls of 'Inclusive' History"

Thomas Dodman, Rebecca L. Spang, "Money, Manhood, and Revolutionary Biography: The Limits of Voluntary Selfhood"

Colin Jones, "Time and the Duchess: Revolution and Temporality in the Letters of the Duchess d'Elbeuf, 1788–94"

Emma Rothschild, "Economic Lives in the French Revolution A Tale of Three Cousins"

Jeff Horn, "'The Vengeance of a Province': Alexandre Rousselin and His Accusers"

David A. Bell, "Tocqueville, Napoleon, and the Writing of Biography in a Democratic Age"

NOTES

[1] Ahmad Khan also plays a prominent role in Ian Coller's *Muslims and Citizens: Islam, Politics, and the French Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).

[2] On the idea of "inward influence" on the French Revolution, see David A. Bell's formulation in "Questioning the Global Turn: The Case of the French Revolution," *French Historical Studies* Vol. 37, No. 1 (Winter 2014): 1-24, and challenges by, among others, Manuel Covo & Megan Maruschke, "The French Revolution as an Imperial Revolution," *French Historical Studies* Vol. 44, No. 3 (2021): 371–397; Lauren R. Clay, "Liberty, Equality, Slavery: Debating the Slave Trade in Revolutionary France," *American Historical Review* Vol. 128 No. 1 (March 2023): 89–119. For an introduction to a global France, see Patrick Boucheron and Stéphane Gerson, eds., *France in the World: A New Global History* (London: Gallic Books, 2021).

[3] See, for example, Amy Murrell Taylor, *The Divided Family in Civil War America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Thavolia Glymph, *The Women's Fight: The Civil War's Battles for Home, Freedom, and Nation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

[4] See, for example: Sian Reynolds, *Marriage & Revolution: Monsieur and Madame Roland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Janet Polasky, *Revolutions without Borders: The Call to Liberty in the Atlantic World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015); Pierre Serna,

Antonelle, Aristocrate et révolutionnaire (Arles: Actes Sud, 2017); Laura Mason, *The Last Revolutionaries: The Conspiracy Trial of Gracchus Babeuf and the Equals* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022); Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Black Spartacus: The Epic Life of Toussaint Louverture* (New York: Picador, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021); Marlene Daut, *The First and Last King of Haiti: The Rise and Fall of Henry Christophe* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2025); Robin Mitchell, *The Biography of Suzanne Simone Baptiste, Madame Toussaint Louverture* (under contract with University of Princeton Press); Seth Cotlar, *Tom Paine's America: The Rise and Fall of Transatlantic Radicalism in the Early Republic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011); Joyce E. Chaplin, *The Franklin Stove: An Unintended American Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2025); Sarah M.S. Pearsall, *Freedom Round the Globe: A New History of the American Revolution* (New York: Doubleday, forthcoming 2026); Gregory E. O'Malley, *The Escapes of David George: An Odyssey of Slavery, Freedom, and the American Revolution* (New York: St Martin's Press, forthcoming 2026).

[5] Sarah Knott, "Narrating the Age of Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly* Vol. 73, No. 1 (January 2016) 3-36: p. 5.

[6] *ibid.* pp 5, 21.

[7] Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Message* (New York: One World, 2024).

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