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Joan L. Coffey, *Léon Harmel: Entrepreneur as Catholic Social Reformer*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003. x + 360 pp. Photographs, maps notes, bibliography and index. \$48.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-268-03360-9.

Review by James F. McMillan, University of Edinburgh.

With a few honourable exceptions (Paul Misner being perhaps the most notable), the history of French and indeed European social Catholicism has failed to attract much attention in Anglophone scholarly literature. [1] Even the late Ralph Gibson, in his path-breaking *A Social History of French Catholicism 1789-1914* (1989), devoted little space to the subject. Small wonder, then, that when Joan L. Coffey cites relevant works in English, she frequently has recourse to older texts such as Parker T. Moon's *The Labor Problem and the Social Catholic Movement in France* (1921) and Alec R. Vidler's *A Century of Social Catholicism, 1820-1920* (1964). Fortunately, however, French social Catholicism has been much better served by Francophone historians, including the likes of Jean-Marie-Mayeur and Emile Poulat [2], though classic works by scholars such as Jean-Baptiste Duroselle and Henri Rollet [3] remain of enduring value. Coffey's protagonist, Léon Harmel, industrialist, social Catholic activist, and friend of Pope Leo XIII, has already been studied in a two-volume biography by Georges Guitton in 1928 and a major work by Pierre Trimouille in 1974 [4], but he rarely receives more than a sentence or two in the sparse English-language historiography. Joan Coffey's admirable in-depth study not only rescues him from undeserved neglect but at the same time does much to illuminate social Catholic thought and the entire social Catholic *milieu* with which Harmel was so intimately associated.

Perhaps the first thing to be said in favour of Coffey's monograph is that she goes out of her way to acknowledge in full—arguably even to excess—her debt to all the scholars who have gone before her. It is truly refreshing to find an author who does not claim to have reinvented the wheel but who, rather, is ready to locate her work in a spectrum that includes groundbreaking work by others. Her modesty, if anything, enhances her own distinctive contribution, which is without doubt substantial. Thanks to extensive research in new sources, above all those housed in the Vatican Archives, she is able to take the story of Harmel forward in ways which surpass the work of her predecessors. At the same time, because she always seeks to place Harmel firmly in context as both industrialist and social Catholic activist, she has much to say of value about the economic and social as well as the religious atmosphere of the *belle époque*.

If the book has a fault, it is perhaps that Coffey has in fact attempted to do too much. Despite her best efforts to master the relevant literature, in her determination to try to flesh out the multiple contexts of Harmel's life and times, she sometimes finds herself generalising about areas where her own expertise is limited. Her bibliography, though impressive, is far from complete. On early social Catholicism, for example, she is over-dependent on Vidler. She is likewise weak on the development of both the Ultramontane and Gallican currents in French Catholicism, while her treatment of Lamennais needs nuancing. There is no evidence that she is familiar with Ruth Harris's work on Lourdes. Her discussion of male religiosity is inconclusive. The result is that, in some stretches of the book, intended to serve as a state-of-the-art synthesis, the discussion is less definitive than it might be. The uninformed therefore need to beware.

Coffey is best when she engages with Harmel himself as an individual, as a French industrialist, and as the social Catholic activist who carried out a remarkable experiment at his model factory at Val-des-

Bois. In 1854, having inherited the family's spinning mill, Harmel followed in his father's footsteps by combining business acumen with a passion for social reform inspired by Catholic doctrine. Theoretically aware, Harmel contributed to the elaboration of social Catholic thought through two major treatises, the *Manuel d'une corporation chrétienne* (1876) and his *Catéchisme du patron* (1889). His most distinctive trait, however, was his unremitting activism, which led him to establish corporations at Val-des-Bois, complete with a family wage for his workers and a factory council. He was also the moving spirit in the Patrons du Nord, an association of Catholic employers in northern France. Probably his most spectacular achievement, however, was to organise a succession of pilgrimages of Catholic workers to Rome—the subject of the best chapter in Coffey's book. Other areas of activism included encouraging the introduction of *aumôniers d'usines* (factory chaplains) and the *semaines sociales* (study weeks where the younger clergy could familiarise themselves with social issues of the day) as well as study circles for workers and Catholic trade unions. Harmel both helped to inspire Leo XIII's famous encyclical on the social question, *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and was in turn galvanised by it.

Coffey does justice to both Harmel's thought and the full range of his social activism. Her book is a vivid portrait of a truly remarkable individual who was anything but typical of his own social class. Yet though clearly sympathetic to Harmel and his efforts to promote social justice, Coffey is never adulatory, and she recognises the limitations of both the Val-des-Bois factory model and of Harmel himself. Like many of his peers, he was reluctant to be anything other than master in his own house, and at bottom he remained a paternalist. It is sad that Coffey passed away just before her book was published, but it will remain as an enduring monument to her own painstaking scholarship and as essential reading for students of the French social Catholic movement of the nineteenth century.

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## NOTES

[1] Paul Misner, *Social Catholicism in Europe: From the Onset of Industrialization to the First World War* (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

[2] J.-M. Mayeur, *Catholicisme social et démocratie chrétienne: Principes romains, expériences françaises* (Paris: Cerf, 1986); E. Poulat, *Eglise contre bourgeoisie* (Paris: Casterman, 1977).

[3] J.-B. Duroselle, *Les Débuts du catholicisme social en France (1822-1871)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1951); H. Rollet, *L'Action sociale des catholiques en France*, 2 vols (Paris: Boivin, 1951-1958).

[4] Georges Guitton, *Léon Harmel* (Paris: Action Populaire, 1928); Pierre Trimouille, *Léon Harmel et l'usine chrétienne du Val des Bois* (Lyon: Centre d'histoire du catholicisme, 1974).

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