

---

*H-France Review* Vol. 5 (February 2005), No. 26

Alan Forrest, *Paris, the Provinces and the French Revolution*. London: Arnold, 2004, viii + 259 pp. Bibliography, Index. \$19.95 U.S. (Pb). ISBN 0-340-56434-2.

Review by Jeff Horn, Manhattan College.

---

For thirty years now, Alan Forrest has been publishing on the subject of the French Revolution in the provinces. This textbook is an attempt to synthesize his thinking for an audience of advanced undergraduates and graduate students. Pushed by his graduate mentor, Richard Cobb, Forrest, like so many of his accomplished peers at Oxford who benefited from Cobb's example, explored provincial archives and learned that "there were limits to the control that Paris could exercise and even greater limits to the loyalty it could attract." This text is not a survey of the Revolution in the provinces; rather "this is a book about the relationship between Paris and provincial France, between centre and periphery, in a period marked by ideological struggle and administrative obduracy" (p. viii). Given the wealth of local studies published in the last few years and the important findings of the series of French colloquia on the various revolutionary regimes, this is a timely subject and among English-speakers, Forrest would appear to be the natural person to undertake it.

Forrest's work begins with an introduction to the problem of the relations between Paris and the provinces. His contemporary context is the European Union's encouragement of regionalism and the challenge to nationalism embodied in this initiative and by the evolving nature of the Union itself (p. 2). A chapter on "Centralization and diversity in the eighteenth century" follows. Next come two chapters on provincial reactions to the crisis of the old régime and the emergence of revolutionary politics in 1789-90. The two lengthiest chapters discuss the growing dissatisfaction with the Paris-based current of Revolutionary politics in 1790-1793 and set the stage for federalism. "The revolt of the provinces" and a chapter on "Jacobinism, centralism and Terror" develop this theme. A chapter on the Directory follows before two thematic yet summary chapters discussing: "Paris and the provinces: the image of the other" and "The Revolution and the growth of regional identity" conclude the book and attempt to situate his conclusions into the broad sweep of French history while making some nods toward contemporary theoretical concerns.

As a textbook, there are some clear strengths to Forrest's account. His writing is, as always, clear and his anecdotes both amuse and instruct. His chapters on the revolutionary decade itself all place events in a longer-term conceptual and political framework that permits both Tocquevillian continuity and the truly "revolutionary" aspects of developments to emerge organically. Throughout the book, the actions of the central state based in Paris are depicted with a clarity and verve that is in many ways reminiscent of Georges Lefebvre's two-volume textbook.<sup>[1]</sup> Unsurprisingly, for someone who has done so much to uncover them, Forrest gives full credit for initiative and creativity to the local political cultures that emerged, flourished and, in some places, foundered during the revolutionary decade. Some contemporary historiographical issues are also usefully discussed. The chapter on "revolutionary priorities in Paris and the provinces" treats the religious question and cultural issues more effectively than other surveys (pp. 119-141) and Forrest gives us a different perspective on David Bell's argument about the ancien régime origins of French nationalism (p. 20).<sup>[2]</sup>

Despite these strengths, it would be difficult to recommend this book either for classroom use or for graduate students. Forrest has an unfortunate rhetorical habit of raising issues that do not directly impact on the relationship of Paris without providing—either in the notes or in the text—a means for

students to determine what their significance might be or what Forrest's own view might be (for examples, see pp. 62, 64, 72, 84, 136, 157, 177, 182, and the entire final chapter). The central shortcoming of this book, however, is that Forrest has not made a convincing case either for the importance of "provincial" sentiment before 1789 or for his Paris/Province dichotomy for the Revolutionary decade. Forrest also had difficulty making this case in his book on Aquitaine.<sup>[3]</sup> Nor does Forrest break down the components of this dichotomy; in other words, he does not examine urban/rural conflict in the provinces or how intra-departmental and/or inter-departmental politics could affect the relationship of the capital to provincial constituents.

Forrest's conceptual framework is also problematic in that he gives lip service to the importance of economic matters, but he gives them only a cursory glance. I would argue that it is impossible to understand the relationship between Paris and the provinces, both before and after 1789, without emphasizing economic questions much more than Forrest does in this work. His treatment of the sale of national lands, the Maximum, and the actions of the Committee of Public Safety more generally all are subjects that cry out for a more thorough economic approach.

Forrest's analysis is occasionally jarring to a specialist of a region that did not participate in the Federalist Revolt. From the perspective of the department of the Aube in Champagne, Forrest's conclusions do not seem to apply. The misspelling of the departmental capital on the map (sadly there are other misspellings as well) that commences the work does not comfort (p. vi). To take just three examples, Forrest recognizes the importance of Revolutionary elections, but his analysis of them leaves a great deal to be desired. Based on his study of Aquitaine cited above, he downplays participation after the fall of the old regime (pp. 44-45, 99) and asserts that the highest voting percentage of the entire Revolutionary decade was recorded in 1790 in the Landes at 61 percent (p. 100). This assertion ignores the findings of those who have written on elections from a national perspective like Malcolm Crook and Mel Edelstein who cite several other higher departmental figures while the Aube tops the list at an impressive 73.4 percent.<sup>[4]</sup> His account of the incidence of Jacobinism and its importance throughout the country also suffers from Forrest's greater familiarity with, and emphasis on, the south. Michael Kennedy has shown the similarity of the Northeast to the South in the size, number, and density of clubs (p. 100).<sup>[5]</sup> Finally, Forrest discusses the fact that no death sentences were handed down in the Champenois departments of the Aube and Seine-et-Marne during the Terror (p. 173). Yet this observation has no real meaning; these departments were close enough to send their suspects to Paris; thirteen Auboises were transferred to the capital to face the guillotine. I suspect that other regional specialists could multiply such observations many times over.<sup>[6]</sup>

That thought brings me to my final criticism: Forrest has waded quite shallowly in the flood of local studies and synthetic accounts that have appeared in the last ten to fifteen years. The number of critical works missing from the notes, although not necessarily from the bibliography, is somewhat stunning given Forrest's wide-ranging interests and experience. To take just a few examples, Forrest mentions the important syntheses of Michel Biard on representatives on mission and Bernard Bodinier and Eric Teyssier on the sale of *biens nationaux* but ignores their conclusions in the text and in the notes.<sup>[7]</sup> In a national study of this sort, how can Christopher Johnson's study of Languedoc be overlooked?<sup>[8]</sup> More thorough reading or additional archival research would have allowed Forrest to explore his central theme of the relationship of Paris to the provinces in light of events that he himself emphasizes such as the Great Fear (pp. 57-60). In his account, this key moment does not have the analytic weight it should, especially given the intellectual concerns underlying this book.

To conclude, I would like to put in a plea for Alan Forrest to write the book he said he wanted to write. Over the years, I have learned a great deal from Forrest's written works and from him in person. I suspect that the textbook format and length restriction held him back. The ghost of Richard Cobb still

needs to be appeased and Forrest has the expertise to write a definitive account. It is my hope that he will focus his considerable talents on that laudable objective.

---

## NOTES

[1] Georges Lefebvre, *The French Revolution*, vol. 1, *From its Origins to 1793*, trans. Elizabeth Moss Evanson (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962) and vol. 2, *From 1793 to 1799*, trans. John Hall Stewart and James Friguglietti (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964).

[2] David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism 1680-1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

[3] Alan Forrest, *The Revolution in Provincial France: Aquitaine, 1789-1799* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[4] Malcolm Crook, *Elections in the French Revolution: An apprenticeship in democracy, 1789-1799* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 160, Melvin Edelstein, "Electoral Behavior during the Constitutional Monarchy (1790-1791): A 'Community' Interpretation," in Renée Waldinger, Philip Dawson, and Isser Woloch. eds., *The French Revolution and the Meaning of Citizenship* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1993), pp. 105-22 and "Participation et sociologie électorales dans les Landes en 1790," *Annales Historiques de la Révolution française* 316 (April-June 1999), pp.301-46 and Jeff Horn, "Toute politique est locale: Une relecture critique de Le nombre et la raison: la révolution française et les élections," *Annales Historiques de la Révolution française* 311:1 (Jan.-Mars 1998), pp. 89-109.

[5] Michael Kennedy, *The Jacobin Clubs in the French Revolution: The First Years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982) and *The Jacobin Clubs in the French Revolution: The Middle Years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

[6] All references to the Aube are based on Jeff Horn, "*Qui Parle pour la Nation?*" : *Les élections et les élus de la Champagne méridionale 1765-1830* (Paris: Société des études robespierristes, 2004).

[7] Michel Biard, *Missionnaires de la République : les représentants du peuple en mission, 1793-95* (Paris: CTHS, 2002) and Bernard Bodinier and Eric Teyssier, *L'événement le plus important de la Révolution' : La vente des biens nationaux (1789-1867) en France et dans les territoires annexés* (Paris: Société des études robespierristes, 2000).

[8] Christopher H. Johnson, *The Life and Death of Industrial Languedoc, 1700-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

Jeff Horn  
Manhattan College  
jeff.horn@manhattan.edu

Copyright © 2005 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on

the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. ISSN 1553-9172