
H-France Review Vol. 6 (July 2006), No. 83

Philipp Blom, *Enlightening the World, Encyclopédie, The Book That Changed the Course of History*. New York and Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. xiii + 372 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$26.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 1-4039-6895-0.

Review by Raymond Birn, University of Oregon.

Philipp Blom is a talented stylist who exploits a variety of narrative forms while tackling a wide range of topics. His experimental academic novel, *The Simpson Papers* (1995), was followed by *The Wines of Austria* (2000). Then came *To Have and To Hold: An Intimate History of Collectors and Collecting* (2002), an account of some of the world's most notorious as well as obscure collectors, replete with personal testimony and reflections upon collecting. Given this growing shelf of diverse titles, it comes as no surprise that Blom's latest publication, *Enlightening the World*, should be a history of the eighteenth century's canonical book, the great *Encyclopédie* (1751-1777) which, in final form, attained thirty-three folio volumes of text, illustrations, and supplements.

Originally published in Great Britain in 2004, *Enlightening the World* first bore the subtitle *The Triumph of Reason in an Unreasonable Age*. Aware that eighteenth-century political leaders often were, theoretically at least, in tune with public intellectuals who advocated religious toleration and educational reform, specialists might bristle at a global definition of the era as "unreasonable." They, therefore, would welcome publisher Palgrave-Macmillan's abandonment of Blom's original subtitle for the American edition (2005). But what to make of its replacement: *The Book That Changed the Course of History*? Would the American or French Revolutions have been unthinkable without the *Encyclopédie*? Did the massive collection of 72,000 articles clear the decks for "enlightened" imperialism and industrialization? Was the *Encyclopédie* the quintessential source for political liberalism, democracy, or totalitarianism? Rather doubtful, I would say. Assuredly the power of unitary causation cannot be attributed to a work that had more than 160 different contributors. Moreover, the historically inaccurate first sentence of *Enlightening the World's* dust jacket does not inspire confidence in Blom's fidelity to the facts: "In 1777, a group of young men produced a book that aimed to tear the world apart and rebuild it, sparking a movement that became known as the Enlightenment." To be accurate, in 1777, the year the last volume of the *Supplément à l'Encyclopédie* was published, d'Alembert was sixty, Diderot and Rousseau were sixty-four, Jaucourt was seventy-three, and Voltaire was eighty-three—all quite past their prime. As a European cultural movement, the Enlightenment itself was more than a generation old.

Enlightening the World comprises a preface and nineteen chapters largely devoted to the *Encyclopédie's* publishing history, analyses of its contents and techniques of presentation, and biographies of several contributors and sympathizers. Complementing this are tales of intrigue and friendship among salon *habitués* in mid-eighteenth-century Paris, encounters with figures determined to silence the *Encyclopédie*, and summary accounts of political events that Blom alleges to have had an impact upon the fortunes of the *Dictionnaire*. Diderot, d'Alembert, and the chevalier de Jaucourt are the main actors. Publisher André-François Le Breton makes crucial cameo appearances, as do Jean-Jacques Rousseau, barons Grimm and d'Holbach, abbé Edme-F. Mallet, Voltaire, woman-of-letters Louise-Florence d'Épinay, and censor-in-chief C.-G. de Lamoignon de Malesherbes. Blom concludes as follows. Though the cultural and intellectual stakes were high among encyclopedists and their enemies, the survival of the *Dictionnaire* in France, despite censorship, publication suspension, and ostensible outright suppression, was due to economic factors: "...the down-to-earth, bourgeois calculation that there was simply too much

money bound up in the enterprise to allow it to migrate to Holland or Prussia, which it certainly would have done had the State flexed its muscle" (p. 235).

Blom digresses freely. For example, following a brief, impressionistic sketch of *Encyclopédie* predecessors (in which he weirdly calls the medieval compiler Isidore of Seville the patron saint of the Internet), Blom inserts a chapter-long description of Paris street life and urban administration in the year 1739. One of his two essential sources for this is Louis-Sebastien Mercier's *Tableau de Paris*; however, the *Tableau* dates from the pre-revolutionary 1780s, not from 1739, nor, as Blom asserts, 1716 (p. 5). Elsewhere an account of Jaucourt's pre-*Encyclopédie* life in England and Holland seems superfluous, and the same may be said regarding the mid-century *guerre des bouffons*, Mme d'Épinay's melodramatic domestic life, and the details concerning the gruesome fate of would-be regicide Robert-François Damiens.

Enlightening the World is intended for inquisitive general readers, not specialist scholars. Blom's sprightly style and flair for the theatrical liven up his book; however, questionable generalizations often mar it. For example, by no means were the eighteenth-century French Parlements the bourgeois-dominated institutions the author claims they were, and Blom never convincingly shows how "theological disagreements" were convenient covers for deeper conflicts between the bourgeoisie and the nobility, orthodoxy and rationalism, or hierarchy and democracy (pp. xiv-xv). Perhaps the strangest of Blom's historical assertions is his labelling of Louis XVI as "a child of the Encyclopedic spirit" (p. 312). In evaluating the intellectual boldness of Enlightenment thinkers, Blom downplays the commitment of Voltaire, and seems as surprised as Diderot at Voltaire's deep involvement in the Calas affair (pp. 272-73). Blom is genuinely uncomfortable with Rousseau. Jean-Jacques had plenty of talents, but possessing "a great wit," as the author claims, was hardly one of them (p. 22). Blom states that Mme de Warens would have the "dubious pleasure" of finding her love affair with the young Rousseau subsequently aired in the *Confessions* (published in 1778). This wasn't possible. After all, she died in 1762, at least four years years before Rousseau undertook his autobiographical exposé. Elsewhere Blom asserts that Rousseau's *Émile* is concerned with the "ideal harmony between a good father and his daughter" (p. 70)—a curious mistake. *Émile* of course deals with the relationship between a tutor and his male pupil.

The most serious factual errors in *Enlightening the World* surround the later history of the *Encyclopédie* and its immediate successors. To be sure, it is a complicated tale; but historians of the book such as Robert Darnton, Kathleen Hardesty Doig, Clorinda Donato, John Lough, Suzanne Tucoo-Chala, and myself (among others) have spent decades pulling it together.[1] Since Blom cites several of these authors in his bibliography and still gets his facts wrong, one must wonder how judicious a reader he is. Here are a few of his errors, along with corrections: (1) Blom maintains that, following suspension of the *Encyclopédie's* publication in 1752, subsequent volumes were printed "with tacit permission" (p. 119). This isn't so. Volumes 3 through 7 would continue to be published openly, with royal privileges, though under more severe censorship than earlier. (2) Blom maintains that Charles-Joseph Panckoucke's "ultimate encyclopedia," the *Encyclopédie méthodique*, was first published in 1778 but seized by the French police in 1770 [sic] (pp. 308-309)! Actually, the *Méthodique* (which ceased publication in 1832 after 166 ½ volumes) got underway in 1782. Twelve years earlier, in 1770, the Paris police had cast into the Bastille, not the *Méthodique*, but the first three volumes of Panckoucke's folio reprint of the original *Encyclopédie*. They were released in 1776.[2] (3) According to Blom, in 1776-1777, the *Encyclopédie's* senior publisher, André Le Breton, produced "a five-volume *Supplément au Dictionnaire raisonné*..." (p. 309). In reality this *Supplément à l'Encyclopédie* was not published by Le Breton but by an international consortium comprised of Panckoucke, Stoupe, and Brunet of Paris, Rey of Amsterdam, and Robinet of Bouillon. (4) Blom asserts that the so-called quarto *Encyclopédie*, whose publication information he gives as Geneva, Neuchâtel and Lyon, 1777-1781, was "prepared by a renegade monk...to purge [Diderot's] of impieties and to rewrite passages to please Protestants." Wrong on virtually all counts: the quarto in two separate editions (Geneva, 1777-79) (Neuchâtel, 1777-1779), and in thirty-six volumes, was largely

Diderot's *Encyclopédie* with the *Supplément* blended in. The "renegade monk" referred to, Fortunato Bartolomeo De Felice, published an entirely different work, the *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire universel raisonné des connoissances humaines*, in quarto, fifty-eight volumes (Yverdon, 1770-1780).

The two contrasting heroes in Blom's narrative are the passionate, temperamental Diderot and the dogged, steadfast Jaucourt. While each was indispensable to the completion of the grand *Dictionnaire*, it is the voluble and self-promoting chief editor who has captured the imagination of critics and readers over the past two and a half centuries. Aside from his editing duties, Diderot was responsible for approximately 6,000 entries. To his credit, Blom rehabilitates Jaucourt, at one point (p. 101) attributing 40,000 articles to the industrious, self-effacing chevalier, at another point claiming that Jaucourt wrote 14,000 entries (p. 239), and finally settling on 17,266 (p. 289). The primary authority on the *Encyclopédie's* contributors, Frank Kafker, does indeed credit Jaucourt with approximately 17,000 articles between one-fourth and one-half of those contained in volumes eight through fifteen and more than 50 percent of those in volumes sixteen and seventeen.[3] Blom suggests that the prevalence of Jaucourt's contributions transformed the final eight volumes of the *Encyclopédie* into *his* book, one that is less an incendiary device and more a reference work. This last assertion is open to question. At least fifteen of Jaucourt's articles were considered sufficiently contentious to publisher Le Breton in 1764 that he secretly censored them; and Jaucourt's article "Peuple" purportedly angered government officials. Meanwhile, the atheist d'Holbach, one of the most outspoken contributors, remained faithful to the end, and his unorthodox articles "Prêtres", "Représentans", and "Théocratie" found pride of place in volumes thirteen, fourteen, and sixteen. Further research is needed to determine whether the tone of the *Encyclopédie* moderated after 1759, and whether the loss of earlier contributors lay behind this alleged change, as Blom also suggests.

If Diderot and Jaucourt are heroes, d'Alembert is almost a villain. Blom depicts Diderot's co-editor (until 1759) as arrogant, quarrelsome, and spineless. Blom maintains that as early as Diderot's brief imprisonment in July 1749, d'Alembert was "ambivalent" towards the *Encyclopédie*. Furthermore, according to Blom, he never took his editing chores seriously, verbally abused his publishers, and failed to see how his explosive article "Genève" could possibly offend Swiss or French authorities. While one cannot deny that d'Alembert preferred furthering his career as an academician to cajoling reluctant contributors, he energetically served the encyclopedists' cause as a cultural insider, particularly within the Académie Française, where he reigned as perpetual secretary between 1772 and 1783. When all is said and done, d'Alembert himself contributed more than 1,500 entries to the *Encyclopédie*; and, unlike Diderot, wrote articles for the *Supplément* of 1776-77.

Aware that eleven volumes of the first-folio *Encyclopédie* contain nearly 2,900 plates and that the history of the *Dictionnaire's* engravings is a tale of free borrowing (if not outright theft) from other sources, Blom devotes most of his important chapter "Métier" to a brief narrative history and to an analysis of the illustrations. Concentrating upon engravings which depict the crafts and pre-industrial labor practices, the author challenges Diderot's claim to have visited hundreds, if not thousands, of workshops. Indeed, Diderot recycled items that were checked out of the Royal Library, purchased from unethical engravers, or torn from older, traditional sources. Following the lead of Roland Barthes, Blom considers pre-industrial-age workspaces and workers portrayed in the *Encyclopédie's* plates as anachronistic idealizations a world of "particular beauty" removed from dangerous, dirty reality. In the illustrations Blom perceives a trust in the values of reason, virtue, and ingenuity. To my mind, the issue is more complicated than this. In dignifying the most menial of crafts, the *Encyclopédie's* plates democratize labor. Moreover, they point out the very real physical risks of pre-industrial work processes. On the one hand, craftspersons and shopkeepers openly socialize with their aristocratic clientele; on the other, miners, foundry-workers, roofers, basket-weavers and others are shown to labor under insalubrious, if not life-threatening, conditions.

Despite its flaws, *Enlightening the World* provides the non-specialist with a vivid portrait of the cultural milieu in which the *Encyclopédie* took shape. While Blom's history of the work and reflections upon its contributors would have profited from closer fact checking and less hasty publication, general readers may consider it a useful point of departure before moving on to more profound, and more accurate, accounts.

NOTES [1] Robert Darnton, *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopédie, 1775-1800* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979); Kathleen Hardesty [Doig], *The Supplément to the Encyclopédie* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1977); idem, "L'*Encyclopédie méthodique* et l'organisation des connaissances," *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie* 12 (1992):59-69; idem, "The Yverdon *Encyclopédie*," *Studies in Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 315 (1994):85-116; Clorinda Donato, "Inventory of the *Encyclopédie d'Yverdon*: a Comparative Study with Diderot's *Encyclopédie*," (Ph.D. dissertation, UCLA, 1987); idem, "Heresy in the *Encyclopédie d'Yverdon*," in John Christian Laursen, ed., *History of Heresies in the 17th and 18th Centuries* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 239-262; Laursen and Robert M. Maniquis, eds., *The Encyclopédie and the Age of Revolution* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1992); John Lough, *Essays on the "Encyclopédie" of Diderot and d'Alembert* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968); Suzanne Tucoo-Chala, *Charles-Joseph Panckoucke et la Librairie française 1736-1798* (Pau and Paris: Marrimpouey Jeune and Jean Touzot, 1977); Raymond F. Birn, *Pierre Rousseau and the Philosophes of Bouillon*, "Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century," 29 (Geneva: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1964).

[2] Blom may indeed be referring to the seizure of the reprint here, but he narrates the matter so ambiguously as to leave the reader confused regarding his intent.

[3] Frank A. Kafker and Serena L. Kafker, *The Encyclopedists as Individuals: a Biographical Dictionary of the Authors of the Encyclopédie*, "Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century," 257 (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1988), p. 177.

Raymond Birn
University of Oregon
rbirn@uoregon.edu

Copyright © 2006 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 re-publication 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.