

H-France Review Vol. 8 (October 2008), No. 132

François Cadilhon, *Jean-Baptiste de Secondat de Montesquieu. Au Nom du père*. Pessac: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2008. , 254 pp. Tables, notes, bibliography. 21€ (pb). ISBN 978-2-86781-485-3.

Review by Rebecca E. Kingston, University of Toronto.

This book provides a snapshot of eighteenth-century French provincial nobility through the life of one prominent Bordeaux aristocrat, Jean-Baptiste de Secondat de Montesquieu. While ostensibly presented as a biography of the son of one of Bordeaux's most famous men of letters, this text reads more particularly as a series of discussions of different aspects of the social history of eighteenth-century France in which the life, choices and activities of the Baron are couched. While some might wish to read this text in search of added insight into the life of his philosopher father, the main attribute of this book is that it provides an archivally-based case-study of the life of a prominent provincial aristocrat before and during the Revolution in France.

There is a paradox in the life of Jean-Baptiste for while his notoriety may be largely due (at least outside a circle of social historians) to the career of his father, the most interesting aspects of his life stem from the ways in which he distinguished himself from his heritage. As Cadilhon shows very well, Jean-Baptiste took very seriously the Enlightenment call to the practice of science. Unlike his father who dabbled in some experimentation, but who, for the most part, adopted his scientific principles from other sources, Jean-Baptiste was devoted to experimentation and to the serious testing of theories and principles, with particular attention to the possible applications of new discoveries.[1] As an experimental natural scientist, Jean-Baptiste was much more rigorous and devoted to the field than his father, and this is shown through his numerous papers and publications (ten published works in total, p. 166) giving an account of the results of his experiments.

His identity as a natural scientist was also solidified by the recognition he received from the scientific community (see in particular pp. 143-158). Cadilhon shows the vast array of scientific interests that gripped Jean-Baptiste. He wrote scientific papers on subjects ranging from the cause of epidemics among cattle (p. 153) to astronomy (p. 147), to local demographics (pp. 150-151) as well as the best means of measuring temperature while controlling for the effects of barometric pressure (p. 145). He was an active participant in the presentations and debates in the local Académie de Bordeaux (the topic of chapter seven). As Cadilhon also emphasises, Jean-Baptiste was most interested in the practical applications of recent scientific discovery (p. 147), which was in contrast to the general orientation of the scientifically-minded in Bordeaux, at least as argued by Pierre Barrière.[2]

Despite the divergence of Jean-Baptiste's intellectual interests from those of his famous father, in other matters he was a dutiful son. He had a good record of promoting the name and reputation of his father. Editorial interventions on his part, sometimes compromised, or left questions concerning the editorial accuracy of works published posthumously under Jean-Baptiste's control. For those reading the book with a primary interest in Montesquieu the father, it would have been helpful if the author had developed this discussion further, in consultation with Catherine Volpilhac-Auguer, currently the scholar with the most knowledge on the history of Montesquieu's manuscripts.[3] As another feature

of family loyalty, as was common among the aristocracy of his day, Jean-Baptiste went to great lengths to ensure the integrity and productivity of the family lands and holdings. Furthermore, Jean-Baptiste sought to keep the tradition of the magistracy continuing in the family for his own son. This is particularly revelatory of the strength of a sense of family tradition and heritage, because both the literary Montesquieu himself, along with his son Jean-Baptiste, followed their own inclinations to reject that judicial heritage in their own choice of career. Nonetheless, both felt duty-bound to ensure that the same opportunity to continue with the magistracy, through the position of president à mortier in the local parlement of Bordeaux, be secured for their progeny.

The book is particularly good as an introduction to the social history of the aristocracy of eighteenth-century France as it provides an overview of the life, practices, and priorities of the nobility in Bordeaux. The author discusses the very complex social make-up of the provincial nobility. He provides an analysis of an inventory of furniture that was required by the Revolutionary government (pp. 91-94), and this helps to provide a sense of the relative size of the wealth and holdings of the Secondat family, and the broader context of eighteenth-century French aristocratic material culture. It also provides an interesting account of the perils of noble lineage in a time of Revolution, and gives an account of how Jean-Baptiste, despite his efforts to cooperate with the Revolutionary government, was imprisoned in 1794 at the age of seventy-eight for suspected allegiance to the forces of counter-revolution (p. 221). He stayed imprisoned for twenty-seven days.

Though not articulated by the author, through this account of his life, it becomes apparent that Jean-Baptiste was a man for whom details mattered. It was the particular duties of noble heritage, and the particular questions of scientific discovery, application and experimentation, that fascinated him over and above the broader questions of philosophy and social science. While some of the background in social history provided in this text is well trodden territory, such as the discussion of trends in scientific analysis in the eighteenth century, it does serve as a backdrop from which to make better sense of Jean-Baptiste's life.

Still, for the most part, this book focuses on some of the particulars of Jean-Baptiste's life, while leaving much of the synthesising up to the reader. In general terms, it could be compared to a series of books covering the nature of noble and intellectual culture in seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe, through the biography of one individual.[4] However, Cadilhon's work suffers in large part from lack of knowledge of important literature in English on French intellectual culture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and especially those texts and arguments dealing with nature of scientific culture at the time (e.g. Jessica Riskin, William Clark and Margaret Jacob as just a few random examples).[5] In addition, while this book provides us with an overview of the life of a notable figure in Bordeaux's social history, it does not provide us with any clear account concerning the overall significance of Jean-Baptiste's activities. This work will serve to fill in some of the gaps in our understanding of local culture in eighteenth century Bordeaux, and in providing historians with easier, though distilled, access to some of the content of archival material in Bordeaux, but it does not engage to any great extent with some of the broader theories concerning the nature and development of European Enlightenment culture.[6] For this reason, the book is perhaps of best use to serious students of eighteenth-century social history who seek an account of educational, commercial or scientific circles and practices in a provincial setting to help them build a broader picture of existing trends.

NOTES

[1] For a superb treatment of the issue of the foundations and nature of Montesquieu's scientific thinking see Denis de Casabianca *De l'étude des sciences à l'esprit des lois* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2008).

[2] See Pierre Barrière, *L'Académie de Bordeaux* (Bordeaux: Éditions Bière, 1951).

[3] For further discussion of the history of the posthumous editing of Montesquieu's works consult the relevant volumes of the newest edition of Montesquieu's collected works, *Oeuvres complètes de Montesquieu*, being published through the Voltaire Foundation of Oxford University and edited by Catherine Volpilhac-Augier, Jean Ehrard and Pierre Rétat.

[4] Examples of this include Peter N. Miller's *Peiresc's Europe* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000).

[5] See, for example, Jessica Riskin, *Science in the Age of Sensibility: the sentimental empiricists of the French Enlightenment* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2002), William Clark et al., ed., *The Sciences in Enlightenment Europe* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1999) and Margaret Jacob's many books and articles on the topic including *The Cultural Meaning of the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1988).

[6] Works in the social history of eighteenth century Bordeaux include Christine Adams, *A Taste for Comfort and Status: a bourgeois family in eighteenth century France* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000); Paul Butel, *La Vie à Bordeaux au 18e siècle* (Pau: Cairn, 2007); Louis Desgraves, *Bordeaux au 18e siècle* (Bordeaux: Editions du sud-ouest, 1993).

Rebecca E. Kingston
University of Toronto
rkingsto@chass.utoronto.ca

Copyright © 2008 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.

ISSN 1553-9172