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Anne Conchon, *J.-J. Guyenot de Châteaubourg (1745-1824) ou le commerce des relations*. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2008. 206 pp. Notes. €20. ISBN: 978-2-85944-603-1.

Review by Jeff Horn, Manhattan College.

Anne Conchon's short book profiling J.-J. Guyenot de Châteaubourg exemplifies many of the major themes currently animating eighteenth-century economic history. She conceives of her subject as an example of the "*exceptionnel normal*" defined by Edoardo Grendi, but does not fall victim to the "*illusion biographique*." As her subtitle claims, Conchon places Guyenot and his entrepreneurial activities firmly into the context of his networks of relations and official positions (p. 10). It is the function of these networks, and Conchon's evocation of their strengths and limitations, that are the most interesting and useful aspect of this book.

Guyenot led a restless, fascinating life full of twists and turns. Born in what became the department of the Jura in 1745 into a family of petty bureaucrats, his education was cut short by his father's financial ruin. He worked for a lawyer before becoming a *feudiste* (examiner of feudal rights) in Anjou in 1765. In 1768, he moved to Paris where he became secretary-archiviste for Louis d'Albert, duc de Luynes et de Chevreuse, the governor of Paris. After 1770, he also worked as a *feudiste* on Luynes' account while developing expertise as an *avocat* (pp. 20-21). This experience allowed Guyenot to become the agent and mediator for a host of great nobles including a number of dukes and peers of the realm. He consolidated his role by becoming the *premier commis* of the *commission des péages* (tolls) (p. 59). Using his position and contacts, Guyenot was able to build on earlier ties to enlist his patrons/clients in various investment opportunities. Through his work in these endeavors and with only minimal financial outlay, Guyenot build up his own stake in hopes of making his fortune. Guyenot became involved with companies involved in swamp-draining, soda and later saltpeter production, as well as mining (pp. 43-53). These activities allowed Guyenot to purchase seigneurial rights and to add the "de Châteaubourg" to his name while imitating a noble lifestyle and values.

With the Revolution and the suppression of the *commission des péages* in 1790, Guyenot shifted careers--drastically. Although he hoped for protection from his network of relations with the nobility, their own ability to maintain their investments was limited. Litigation lasting well into the Napoleonic era was the chief result (p. 86). But Guyenot did not remain on the sidelines; he shifted his ambitions to the Haute-Marne where he became an absentee *maître de forges* (iron-master) by taking advantage of the need for cash of the noble owner and adding to his holdings with the purchase of *biens nationaux* (pp. 89-91). Although Guyenot had little technical knowledge or experience managing an industrial enterprise, his forges generally prospered until the end of the Revolutionary decade when he began to devote his attention to taking advantage of a canal concession (pp. 143, 158). Difficulties with investors and changing economic circumstances led to the failure of Guyenot's canal-building endeavor and ultimately forced him into bankruptcy. He was imprisoned for three years (1810-13) for debt and lost his forges and most of his other property. Until his death in 1824, Guyenot remained full of big ambitions, but with his credit and reputation gone, he no longer had the means to work toward his goals (pp. 157, 171).

This extraordinary life for a relatively ordinary man is given weight and meaning by Conchon's emphasis on networks. She painstakingly sets out the various links and linkages between Guyenot and the nobles he worked with and for. As the client of these nobles, Guyenot made his fortune. He was useful to these nobles because he was willing to sell his influence on the *commission des péages* to help them maximize the profit from their feudal rights or so they could benefit from high valuations of these rights when the administrative monarchy sought to repurchase them (pp. 61-70). The description of how both nobles and bourgeois officeholders made use of privilege for profit and how their interests coincided is not new, but Conchon's elucidation of the overlap of noble networks and their links to this level of state service are unique wrinkles.

Although Guyenot failed to gain administrative employment after the suppression of the *commission des péages*, it was not through lack of trying. He wrote countless memoirs, petitions and letters over the course of the revolutionary decade and beyond to try to attract the attention of those in power (pp. 119, 122-25). His forges were also dependent on state contracts: Guyenot preferred the reliability and consistency of working for the government and overlooked the constraints such contracts entailed (p. 110). What made Guyenot's canal-building frenzy possible were his enduring ties to nobles and former nobles and the web of relationships that he had built over the preceding thirty years (pp. 143-150). Demonstrating the changing nature of Guyenot's dependence on the state across the revolutionary divide is also an important contribution of Conchon's study.

Conchon has undertaken extensive archival research. It is clear, however, that her expertise is in the eighteenth century and that her exploration of the toll structure of *ancien régime* France provided the background for her biographical approach. This focus means that there are a few hanging threads that she might have pulled on to bring greater depth to her study, especially covering the last thirty-three years of Guyenot's life. I would have liked to see much more attention to Guyenot's post-1790 litigation against his noble patrons and clients. These court cases might have told us more about how nobles protected their assets and how their former networks both aided and hindered these efforts. It might also have shed light on the fate of the noble aspirations of this bourgeois climber. Secondly, the activities of Guyenot's forges during the period of the Maximum and under the oversight of representatives on mission surely left a documentary trail that would have enriched this study.<sup>[1]</sup> I would also have liked to have seen Conchon situate Guyenot's trajectory and experiences into the literatures on patronage, noble economic activities and the "aristocratic reaction." Given her long involvement with the subject, her position as *maître de conférences* at Paris I Sorbonne and the short length of the book, this is a missed opportunity. A model for this kind of analysis is T.J.A. Le Goff's ongoing investigation of the mediating functions of stock-brokers.<sup>[2]</sup>

J.-J. Guyenot de Châteaubourg has been rescued from the dusty bin of history. His life and experiences illuminate a number of important concerns for historians of the second half of the eighteenth century. This inexpensive edition issued by the Sorbonne will find its way into many personal collections, but should be purchased for most libraries where Conchon's findings can be used to supplement, debate and demonstrate the ideas of others. It is to be hoped that in subsequent works we will learn more about Conchon's own sense of the historiographical impact of her research.

#### NOTES:

[1] See, for example, Michel Biard, *Missionnaires de la République: Les représentants du peuple en mission (1793-1795)* (Paris: Éditions du CTHS, 2003), Jeff Horn, *The Path Not Taken: French Industrialization in the Age of Revolution, 1750-1830* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), and Camille Richard, *Le Comité de Salut public et les fabrications de guerre sous la Terreur* (Paris: F. Rieder et Cie, 1922).

[2] Le Goff has delivered a stimulating series of papers in France, England and North America on this subject. One of their strengths is his historiographical engagement and willingness to consider the broader implications of his findings. He is turning a paper given in November 2008 at the Western Society for French History entitled: "Greed, Fear and Fiscal Policy in the Credit Crunch of 1766: the downfall of Claude Roques, *agent de change, banquier et intéressé dans les affaires du roi*" into a full-length study.

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