

Timothy Tackett, *The Glory and the Sorrow: A Parisian and His World in the Age of the French Revolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. 360 pp. Appendix, notes, bibliography, and index. \$24.95 U.S. (cl.). 9780197557389. \$9.99 U.S. (eb). 9780197557402.

Review by Michael Rapport, Glasgow University

Adrien-Joseph Colson spent most of his adult life living in a small apartment above a candlemaker's shop on the Rue des Arcis in the centre of Paris. With the sounds of hustle and bustle from the teeming neighbourhood drifting in from just outside and the occasional whiff of tallow wafting up from downstairs, Colson, who was a lawyer, conducted much of his business from his living quarters. Files and account-books were stowed in each of the three modest rooms. Among the more pleasurable papers that he worked on were his letters to his friend Roch Lemaigre in Berry in central France. Lemaigre was the local agent of Colson's primary client, the aristocratic Longaunay family, who owned estates both in Berry and in Normandy. The correspondence, amounting to thousands of letters stretching over decades, include not only information on the Longaunay's affairs, but also more personal news and reflections. They also form the core of Timothy Tackett's evocative and engaging book.

The author uses Colson's letters, the vast majority of which are held at the Archives départementales de l'Indre, supplemented by other sources (such as the notarial records of Colson's modest estate after his passing in 1797) to weave an elegant narrative of the otherwise obscure jurist's life. The story runs from the arrival of Colson (who was born in 1727) in Paris as a young man from (of all places!) Varennes in the Clermontais in 1758, through his efforts to establish his practice. It charts his relationships with his clients, especially the Longaunays but also a family of wine merchants who provided him with much of his additional work. And it passes through the crisis of the Old Regime and into the crucible of the Revolution itself. The result is a textured reconstruction of how one middle-class professional experienced the last years of the old order and the birth of the new.

In recounting Colson's life through these transformative decades, we get tantalising insights into how one person witnessed and participated in the events, in some cases almost literally around the corner from where the lawyer lived. Yet we also catch telling glimpses of relationships that may defy the clearer-cut conceptualisations of social conflict and cultural transformation that we historians sometimes impose on the French Revolution. This lies in part because Colson's own social standing hovered somewhere between the working people of Paris and the elite world of the propertied. Colson himself came from an artisanal family in Varennes but was most likely talent-spotted by a priest who encouraged him to follow the classical curriculum of the day, which ultimately launched him into his legal career. In Paris, he lived in a populous central district—the Saint-Merri quarter (the Section des Lombards in 1790)—where the people lived in four- or five-storey tenements, in which all the floors together typically represented the economic strata of urban society: the higher up the building one went, the poorer the tenants. While at its heart stood the striking Church of Saint-Jacques-de-la-Boucherie (only its tower remains today), it was a densely-packed neighbourhood, so much so that, a century later part of area was designated within the *ilot insalubre no. 1* by the city authorities, a district of slums riven with tuberculosis and slated for redevelopment.<sup>[1]</sup> This

was an area which had no rich: while Colson himself had modest financial investments and was comfortable, he rented his apartment and owned no property. He took his meals in the café across the road and knew his neighbours – shopkeepers, tradespeople, working families and the paupers. It means that Colson’s correspondence with Lemaigre speaks loudly of the daily struggles of working men and women of the capital.

Yet at the same time Colson dealt regularly with his aristocratic clients, the Longaunays, and would frequently cross the river—always on foot—to the townhouse that they rented in the gilded Saint-Germain quarter in order to discuss business. So Colson’s correspondence gives an insight into the fluidity of social relations in the eighteenth century, and potentially of social identities, since Colson moved seamlessly between neighbourhoods that were in many ways worlds apart. Colson’s relationship with the Longaunays also reveals an individual case of the frictions and transformations in social hierarchies that occurred in later eighteenth-century France. As their lawyer, Colson dutifully served their interests, but he sometimes shared with Lemaigre his impatience with their lack of frugality (particularly on the part of one of the more spendthrift sons) and his frustration at their unwillingness to yield to financial realities. At the same time, however, Colson undertook the task of enforcing market fees and fishing rights and of resurrecting old seigneurial impositions that had lapsed in order to maximise his patrons’ revenues. One wonders how far these activities can be taken as evidence of a ‘seigneurial reaction’, the existence of which was debated among early and mid-twentieth-century historians.[2] During the Revolution, Colson, although increasingly radicalised, originally remained loyal to the Longaunays, distinguishing ‘good’ aristocrats from the ‘bad’ ones.

For historians interested in the French Revolution as the transformation in political culture, Colson’s embrace of politics and his radicalisation are especially telling. In the political crisis of 1787-89, Colson certainly tried to follow the events as they unfolded, but interestingly, as Tackett points out, people were initially unaware of the financial crisis faced by the monarchy. That and the secrecy in which royal decisions were made ensured that a fog of rumour and speculation substituted for informed engagement with the debates in Versailles. Yet, slowly but surely, Colson’s political awakening began. This did not mean that Colson became a fire-breathing radical overnight. He followed the political stand-off between the Parlement of Paris and the King, but it seems to have been primarily because his own legal proceedings ground to a halt because of the conflict. He appears to have had none of the lawyerly activism that enveloped some of his younger colleagues who supported the judges against the crown. In fact, in one letter to Lemaigre, Colson expressed his support for the King, whom he felt had already sacrificed enough for the public good. Initially, there was a blend of instinctive loyalty to the monarchy and a natural sense of justice: the King, Colson said approvingly, was trying to ensure that the wealthy paid their fair share of taxation. He witnessed for himself the ideological ferment in the Palais-Royal, where he had his regular watering-hole and where pamphlets and newspapers cascaded onto people eager for news – and some of which he read. Yet he stayed away from his electoral district meeting in 1789 because he worried, needlessly as it turned out, that he would not know enough people, since the district cut across parish boundaries. Absent from the fighting around the Bastille, Colson was nevertheless in the crowd when the King came to Paris on 17 July and donned the tricolour cockade.

Fitful it may have been, but the years between 1787 and 1789 seem to have been transformative, with Tackett detecting a shift in the very vocabulary that Colson used to discuss his views of society, and the injection of politics into his correspondence. Colson’s own experience reveals the state of tension that existed throughout the revolutionary years, between inspiration and hope for a better future on the one hand, and anxiety, desperation and sheer terror on the other.

This was not helped by the swirl of rumour and speculation that enveloped the political conversations among Colson's neighbours and friends. Yet it is equally clear that Colson worked hard to disentangle reliable from misleading and downright false information. This may have been because as a lawyer he was especially well-equipped to examine the evidence critically, so may not have been typical of your average Parisian, but it is none the less a reminder to historians that just because a rumour was recorded, it did not mean that everyone credulously believed it. It also holds up a mirror to our own age, enveloped as it is in fake news, misinformation and gossip, no less than was Colson's world.

It was the staggering news of the royal family's flight in the night of 20-21 June 1791 and their arrest at Colson's place of birth, Varennes, that truly began Colson's radicalisation, as it did for so many other French people. That Colson's politics were now driven in part by the very kind of conspiracy theories that he had tried so hard to assess with care is testament to the confusion and disorientation that arose inside the fast pace of events and the repeated collision between hope and fear. His political evolution was then given the final, decisive push by the war that broke out in April 1792, with both the outburst of patriotism at first and then the fears that it stirred as the Prussians drew close to Paris and the suspicion of treason—which in the circumstances seemed to be credible—by the King. Even so, Colson was appalled by the butchery of the September Massacres, the horrifying consequences of which he witnessed.

That Colson's political journey was not linear is suggested by the rich texture of his life. In 1790, he proudly reported to Lemaigre that he was joining the National Guard of his own Section des Lombards, but this might have been as much due to a desire to ensure order—Colson, like other Parisians, was acutely fearful of crime—as it was of full-blooded revolutionary commitment. In 1792, while his letters are peppered with denunciations of 'aristocrats', he loyally served the Longaunays, perhaps out of economic interest, but perhaps too out of the persistence of long-held ties and loyalty. Over the course of 1793, the relationship eventually soured, but—in another nuance—it appears to have been due less overtly to Colson's politicisation and more to strong disagreements over how the family should confront the economic pressures exerted by the Revolution and Colson's gradual replacement by another agent. By contrast, the sad rupture of his relationship with Lemaigre appears to have been the result of politics, which worked on the awkward, triangular relationship between the aristocratic family, the Parisian lawyer and the agent in Berry: probably for the sake of personal survival (his life had been threatened by some of the Longaunay's 'vassals' in 1789), Lemaigre adopted an ever-more radical stance in local politics, but unlike Colson also sought to distance himself from his compromising connections with the Marquis and his family. This also meant that Lemaigre stopped responding to Colson's letters, which reveal a mounting sorrow at the loss of a close personal friendship.

The whole picture is a subtle one, and probably reflects the experience of most politically engaged French people. Personal connections can, of course, work in different directions and it may have been Colson's own strong ties to his neighbourhood that led him to be vocal in his approval of his section's actions, which aligned itself with the Jacobins even as he struggled to serve the Longaunays. The attempt by General François Dumouriez to turn his army against Paris in April 1793 ultimately led Colson to join his National Guard unit during the purge of the Girondins on 31 May-2 June 1793, when at his age he would have been entitled to have stayed home, sitting those days out.

Yet this did not mean that he was swept along entirely by the radical tide, and this is demonstrated not only by his opposition to the death penalty imposed on Louis XVI in January

1793, but more consistently by the persistence of Colson's Catholicism, which co-existed with his republicanism. He may have been strongly influenced by the ideas of abbé Claude Fauchet, whose homily devoted to those killed during the storming of Bastille he heard in his local church, Saint-Jacques-de-la-Boucherie, in early August 1789. He accepted (explicitly) Protestants and (apparently) Jews as fellow citizens, went along comfortably with the nationalisation of church property, embraced the constitutional church, dutifully castigated the non-juror priests and later saw no difficulty in adapting to the revolutionary calendar. Yet at the same time Colson was saddened to encounter the mounting anti-clericalism and to hear the rumour (as early as 1789) that the clergy would be forced to wear secular clothes. And Colson and his neighbours managed to see off some of the 'dechristianisation' imposed by the Hébertist-dominated Paris Commune in the autumn and early winter of 1793: on Christmas Eve, the section's National Guard mobilised to protect the church to allow Mass to be said and the bells to peal out at midnight.

It is regrettable, but entirely understandable, that we do not have Lemaigre's replies to Colson's letters. Colson appears to have destroyed this half of the correspondence sometime in 1793 or 1794: while (as it turned out) never personally threatened with arrest during the Terror, he clearly seems to have thought it wise to destroy any potentially compromising documents, which included his friend's letters. Had they existed, it would have allowed the author to have examined the ways in which the epistolatory relationship evolved, which is helpful in turn to understanding the content: what was in the letters, how it was expressed and also what remained unsaid and why. Although it is certainly not true in Colson's case, some letters were written to be read out to others, such as family members or friends. Correspondence was a social practice that often followed certain conventions, which in Colson's case also changed under the revolutionary impact.<sup>[3]</sup> Within the already substantial boundaries of the source base, Tackett is sensitive to this last point, in particular, especially the changes in language that Colson's own letters carry: most strikingly of all, his signature becoming a terse 'The Republican Colson', a sign of his new politics or of his failing friendship with Lemaigre, or both. One wonders how Lemaigre responded, but, of course, we will never know.

So Tackett's sensitive and richly-detailed reconstruction of Colson's life through his correspondence chronicles the political twists and turns of one Parisian who might otherwise have remained obscure. How Colson lived through the French Revolution speaks to the possibilities that the daily experience of the upheaval can carry for our understanding of the revolution as a *process*, a route that David Andress identified not so long ago.<sup>[4]</sup> Part of this process is the transformation of urban space and the way it was lived in and used by the authorities and the people, as this reviewer has argued and will argue elsewhere.<sup>[5]</sup> One of the beauties of Tackett's writing is that one comes away with a vivid sense of the urban space and the people among whom Colson lived, recalling David Garrioch's work on the making of revolutionary Paris and on neighbourhood and community in the city.<sup>[6]</sup> One also leaves with tantalising insights into how the cityscape and how it was 'lived' changed under the impact of the revolution. There were the physical and symbolic changes: the removal of shrines, the renaming of streets and the destruction of Colson's beloved Saint-Jacques-de-la-Boucherie in 1797. There were also the changes to life in the streets themselves: the silencing of church bells, the diminution of traffic (since horses were commandeered for the war effort) and the disappearance, just as Colson had feared, of clerics in their cassocks and habits.

Yet, just as Colson's own political odyssey was not a straightforward trajectory, neither was that of the revolutionary process itself, as evidenced by the frictions within it. Many of the people of Colson's section who gathered to defend the saying of Christmas Mass in 1793 also

identified themselves as ‘sans-culottes’, against the very officials who claimed leadership of the popular movement. Colson’s very normal background—that is *not* to mean ‘banal’ at all: it was far from that—makes his experience of revolution so important. It almost certainly reflects the daily twists and turns and the nuances, hopes and fears, undergone by many French people in these turbulent times.

## NOTES

[1] There is a model of the area in the Musée Carnavalet: <https://www.parismuseescollections.paris.fr/fr/musee-carnavalet/oeuvres/quartier-de-saint-merri-ou-ilot-insalubre-ndeg-1#infos-principales>. The model was created to illustrate the close quarters living of the district when it was designated as an *îlot insalubre*.

[2] See William Doyle, ‘Was there an Aristocratic Reaction in Pre-Revolutionary France?’ *Past and Present* No. 57 (November, 1972), pp. 97-122 and Olwen Hufton, ‘The Seigneur and the Rural Community in Eighteenth-Century France. The Seigneurial Reaction: A Reappraisal’ *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 29 (1979), 21-39. Recent, nuanced interpretations as to how seigneurs in rural France tried to firm-up their legal and economic hold on their estates and/or to maximise their income by exploiting dues or other sources of income include the work of Jeremy Hayhoe, *Enlightened Feudalism: Seigneurial Justice and Village Society in Eighteenth-Century northern Burgundy* (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2008).

[3] On methodological approaches to such relationships, see, for example, David Barton and Nigel Hall, ‘Introduction’, in *Letter writing as a social practice* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2000) pp. 1-9.

[4] David Andress (ed.), *Experiencing the French Revolution* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2013), especially the introduction. See also the rich range of approaches on daily experience in Mette Harder and Jennifer Ngaire Heuer (eds), *Life in Revolutionary France* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

[5] For an innovative spatial approach see Laura Talamante’s chapter in Harder and Heuer, *op. cit.*, which uses mapping techniques to reveal how women in Marseille were politicised, became visible in public spaces and how this altered their social identities.

[6] David Garrioch, *The Making of Revolutionary Paris* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2002) and Garrioch, *Neighbourhood and Community in Paris, 1740-1790* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

Michael Rapport  
Glasgow University  
Michael.Rapport@glasgow.ac.uk

Copyright © 2022 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.

H-France Forum  
Volume 17 (2022), Issue 8, #2