

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.

Response by Timothy Tackett, University of California, Irvine

My relationship with Adrien-Joseph Colson, the focus of *The Glory and the Sorrow*, was a long time in developing. I first encountered his correspondence in 1994, soon after the partial collection of his letters was published, a collection of excerpts focusing almost entirely on the French Revolution.[1] As soon as I had read the publication, I contacted the departmental archives of the Indre in the central province of Berry where the original documents were held, asking if there were any more letters. When I was told that there were hundreds, I journeyed to Châteauroux, the *chef-lieu* of the Indre, to have a look. Over the next twenty years, I took the long, slow train ride down from Paris perhaps a half dozen times. I went at all seasons of the year, once even bundled up and tromping through the snow from my hotel to the archives some two miles away. And in fact, as you have read, I discovered over a thousand letters, not just on the Revolutionary era, but covering the entire period from late 1782 through 1795. The correspondence seems to have been preserved because the addressee's son later became head archivist in the Indre and the entire family archives were deposited there sometime in the first half of the nineteenth century.

The correspondence in question essentially concerned the business activities of a noble family residing in Paris for whom Colson was the principal lawyer and agent. It was addressed to the local bailiff, Roch Lemaigre, who was living on the family's lands and looking after their seigniorial holdings near the small town of Levroux just north of Châteauroux. But each four-page letter almost always included a paragraph or two in which Colson recounted the recent events in his own life and the life of Paris. It soon emerged, moreover, that Colson had known Lemaigre when they were both young men in Paris and when he had no doubt helped obtain the position in Berry for his friend. The two regularly exchanged all kind of news, public and private, but they also sent along gifts, discussed medical treatments, and on occasion visited one another. On several occasions Colson described Lemaigre as his closest friend in the world. As 1789 approached, the space devoted to events grew until it sometimes took up the entire letter. Unfortunately, however, the non-business paragraphs were not always in the same place in the letters and photographing the whole series seemed impractical (and also unacceptable to the archival staff). So in the end I opted to slog through the entire correspondence *sur place*, letter by letter, taking notes as I went.

As some of you may perhaps remember Colson's testimony frequently appeared in my book on *The Coming of the Terror*. But Colson was such a revealing, even endearing figure, that it occurred to me he might well be the subject of a micro-historical biography in his own right. In fact, biography per se was something of a new departure for me. I had spent much of my career counting people and things, analyzing them as collectives: the 320 priests of one diocese in southeastern France; hundreds of cahiers de doléances from throughout the kingdom; some sixty thousand

clergymen subjected to the oath of 1791; and the 1300 deputies of the first National Assembly. Nevertheless, the focus on this single individual seemed attractive for a number of reasons.

First, the close focus on Colson allowed me to trace the itinerary and the psychology of a very minor figure through the transitional period from the last decade of the Old Regime through the Revolution. He was indeed a “Mr. Ordinary,” as Colin Jones has described him in a recent review, a man who never published, who never held an office, and who seemed to know almost nothing about the Enlightenment.[2] To be sure, I do not wish to diminish the importance of studies of the major Revolutionary leaders—Robespierre or Marat or Brissot or Lafayette, for example. But biographies of Mr. Ordinaries like Colson are much rarer in the historical literature and they have the potential of revealing what it was like to live through the collapse of the Old Regime and the emergence of a Revolution at the local level and among the more humble classes.

Second—and this is a theme that the four reviewers chose not to underline—the letters could also provide insight into the nearly unknown relations between nobles and their commoner agents in Paris and in the provinces during the Old Regime and the Revolution. Although I did not spend as much time on the business portions of the correspondence, this aspect of Colson’s career could not be ignored if I was fully to understand him.

Third, a biography of Colson permitted me to learn more about the social history of Paris during the period, a city on which I had previously done relatively little research. In order to situate Colson in his milieu, I spent many long months tracking down evidence about his street and his neighborhood, and eventually about the apartment where he lived. Some of this came from allusions in letters, but much was extracted from a variety of notarial, seigneurial, and police archives. It soon emerged that he resided in one of most impoverished and densely populated quarters of the Right Bank—and a hotbed of sans-culotte activity in the 1790s. Thus, such a biography could provide insight into the trajectory not only of one individual, but of a whole small neighborhood before and at the time of the Revolution. And here I most acknowledge the assistance of my cousin by marriage, Mary Kergall, a professional genealogist living in France, who in fact knew the Paris archives much better than I. Her collaboration was especially important during the long period of some twenty months when the recent pandemic disallowed my travel to France.

Fourth, the project required me to undertake an inquiry into Colson’s *état civil*, before and after the Revolution, again with Mary’s invaluable assistance. (And I would note that the biography in the introduction to the earlier published edition of excerpts is often incorrect). I felt an absolute thrill when Mary was at last able to track down the date and place of Colson’s death, which had long eluded me and which she found mentioned in the archives of the Meuse, the department where he was born. And then, almost miraculously, she came up with his *inventaire d’après décès*, a document that was enormously revealing of the interior of Colson’s apartment and of his possessions and material culture; a kind of document, moreover, that is especially difficult to find in the Paris archives, which were, as you know, ravaged by fire in 1871.

Fifth, since Colson lived in the very heart of Right Bank Paris, the study could provide insight into the impact of rumor and panic, which I soon discovered persisted in Paris continuously throughout the Revolution. The letters underlined the uncertainty, the confusion, and the felt need to construct

“improvised news,” as one social psychologist has termed the phenomenon of rumor.[3] I discovered a veritable cognitive dissonance in Colson’s mind vis-à-vis nobles and clergy and women, for example, a cognitive dissonance that was, I suspect, far from uncommon among a great many participants in the Revolution.

Finally, the Colson biography allowed me to explore and develop an aspect of the historian’s craft that had long intrigued me: history as storytelling. To be sure, I do believe that many topics in history can be undertaken following something approaching the scientific method, posing hypotheses or “interpretations” and then testing those hypotheses through the marshalling of quantitative evidence. And I had made use of such an approach, at least in part, in many of my previous studies. But as historians, we also have the responsibility, it seems to me, of making our accounts of the past as readable and user-friendly as possible. There is nothing wrong with indulging in storytelling as well as in analysis and interpretation. The micro-biographies of minor figures, like the micro-histories of single geographic localities, can be enormously revealing of the lived experience of the last decades of the Old Regime and the Revolution, with all the hopes and fears, the uncertainties and misunderstandings of individuals who obviously had no foreknowledge of events. And the biography of Colson—as the four reviewers have noted—was especially insightful in that he stood as a kind of social and cultural intermediary. He was linked both to the middle-class world of his legal profession and to the milieu of shopkeepers and artisans among whom he lived and—especially given his origins as the son of a village tanner—with whom he felt a strong personal affinity.

To some extent, with a broader reading public in mind, I chose to downplay or mention only obliquely many of the major historiographical debates surrounding the Revolution. I must also admit to a certain aesthetic choice of not wearing theory and methodology on my sleeve, and of not weighing down the text with issues that might seem obscure to the general reader. But especially in the conclusion, the book does address some such interpretive issues. The testimony of Colson, I argue, does reveal the extent to which the Revolution was utterly unanticipated; and the insignificant role of ideology in the coming of that Revolution for Colson and his milieu. The letters also underline the importance of the so-called “Pre-Revolutionary” period (1787-1789) in the political awakening of Colson and his neighbors. Thereafter, the correspondence is revealing of the importance of community interaction in radicalizing Colson and his neighbors and the fellow members of his local section and national guard battalion. It also brings to light the pervasiveness of rumor and conspiracy fears throughout the Revolution, and the intense alternation of emotions between fear and hatred, on the one hand, and on the other, the sentiment of joy and of the collective feelings of love that we call “fraternity.” Finally, the correspondence underscores the continuing importance of religion for Colson and many of his friends. Though they seemed to have had no difficulties accepting the transformations of the Church embodied in the Civil Constitution of the Clergy of 1790, they were deeply distressed by the movement of de-Christianization of late 1793 and 1794. This unhappiness may well have been an additional reason why many of the people in central Paris displayed little enthusiasm for the Terror of 1794 and only limited support for Robespierre and his allies on the night of 9 Thermidor.

In conclusion, I want to offer my profound thanks to Bob Blackman for organizing this discussion and to Jeff Horn, Katie Jarvis, Marisa Linton, and Michael Rapport for their thoughtful and helpful

commentaries and their generosity in spending a bit of their very busy schedules to reflect on my book. Donc un très grand merci!

NOTES

[1] Adrien-Joseph Colson, *Lettres d'un bourgeois de Paris à un ami de province, 1788-1793*, ed. Chantal Plantier-Sanson (Saint-Cyr-sur-Loire, Christian Pirot, 1993).

[2] Colin Jones in *The New York Review of Books*, December 17, 2021.

[3] Tamotsu Shibutani, *Improvised News: A Sociological Study of Rumor* (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs Merrill Co., 1966).

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