

ALAN FORREST. *Society and Politics in Revolutionary Bordeaux*. London: Oxford University Press, 1975. Pp. 300. \$22.50.

RICHARD COBB. *Paris and Its Provinces 1792–1802*. London: Oxford University Press, 1975. Pp. 277. \$20.

Since the mid 1960s *les Anglo-Saxons* have assumed the leadership in distinguishing the history of Revolutionary France from the history of Revolutionary Paris. Places as small as Elbeuf and as large as Marseille have come under scrutiny, and one consequence is the discovery of how diverse the Revolutionary experience indeed was. Furthermore, sufficiently immune to sterile debates about the proletarian nature of *sans-culottisme* or *petit embourgeoisement* of the Committee of Public Safety, nearly obligatory topics for post-Soboul historians inside France, British and American scholars are carefully investigating aspects of social continuity between the Revolutionary period and *ancien régime*. For example, the mercantile/professional elites who replaced the aristocratic/judicial ones in Lyon, Marseille, and Bordeaux made a point of protecting the local interests of their cities from the radical and centralizing onslaught of Paris. It was national crisis that converted timeworn regionalism into counterrevolution.

Nevertheless, the so-called Federalist revolts of 1793 were the result of no monolithic political ideology. As Alan Forrest reveals, Bordeaux was much less royalist than Lyon. Politically educated in the *Musée* reading club of the 1780s, the mercantile leadership of the southwestern port was both republican and moderate. It also was patrician and devoted to local interests. Once believing that the Convention had disregarded these interests and pandered to the Paris rabble, the Bordelais republicans spoke of saving the Revolution. A force was organized to march to Paris—a pathetic little band of 400, mostly recruited workmen, that disbanded after fifty kilometers. In three months Bordeaux's revolt was starved out and the Terror came. Compared to the ravages in Lyon and Marseille, however, the Jacobin reprisals against Bordeaux's erstwhile Federalist leaders were mild. The *représentant en mission*, Jullien, considered them patriots who had gone astray and concentrated his wrath upon "l'aristocratie de la richesse," refractory priests, and the poor souls who sheltered nonjuring clergy.

For Forrest the leitmotiv for Bordeaux during the Revolution was continuity rather than change, the replacement of aristocratic political elites with mercantile ones. Therefore, the Federalist revolt, not the Terror, is of central interest. Home-bred Jacobinism never was very powerful, and most of Bordeaux's sections were tame. Convincing as Forrest's observations of republican conservatism may be, his *specific* reasons for Bordeaux's revolt are but vaguely presented. For example, he writes of "relentless devotion to the profit motive" as the central factor behind her merchants' challenge to the Mountain, leaving horror of the September Massacres, pessimistic reports of the Girondin deputies, and coup of 2 June 1793 as secondary

ones. Nonetheless, Forrest has indisputably captured *l'esprit bordelaise*—its complacency, self-centeredness, and municipal pride. This is a valuable addition to local studies of the Revolution.

Forrest's mentor at Oxford, Richard Cobb, has himself devoted a portion of his career to analyzing the pressures of Paris upon Revolutionary France. In his most recent book, a loosely connected set of lectures and seminar papers, Cobb stresses the disharmonious relationships between the capital and her *pourtoir* during the 1790s. Between the year of the Terror and emergence of the First Consul, *la Grande Nation* took shape. Associated with the glories of Empire, however, were administrative and judicial chaos, a breakdown of police authority, brigandage that spilled across newly eradicated frontiers, and a climate of poverty and fear. The first three chapters of Cobb's volume consider the influence of road, forest, and river upon the now-lost villages surrounding Paris; the fourth chapter details what Cobb refers to as "the politics of mistrust" between the capital and Versailles from 1793 to 1798; and the final one, the longest, somewhat artificially extends the *pourtoir* into the newly acquired Belgian departments, so as to offer Cobb the opportunity of describing the fortunes of two armies of brigands that terrorized the north between 1795 and 1798: *la bande juive* and *la bande à Salambier*.

Because Cobb's narrative strengths are historical and not journalistic, he might have spared the reader his recollections of 1944–45, pique concerning Breton separatism, and contempt for present-day developers of Paris's *ceinture verte*. Few others than Cobb can weave as absorbing a tale from occasional police reports and trial records; and the main result, a description of late-eighteenth-century poverty and banditry, is superb. For Cobb, the uprooted, disinherited, and, in the case of the Jewish brigands of *la route du Nord*, newly liberated, fill an unchanging countryside with a climate of restlessness and fear. Reference to "the tribal calls, the sound of savage instruments, or the silence of years and years of deep sleep," of the Pays de France may seem melodramatic; despite such romance, what historian today is more readable than Cobb?

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MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT. *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*. Edited by Carol H. Poston. 1796; rpt. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1976. Pp. 201. \$10.35 and \$4.95.

After *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* are her most interesting and readable work. The *Letters* were first written in 1795 while Wollstonecraft was journeying with her infant daugh-

ter through Scandinavia on business for Gilbert Imlay. Their unusual mixture of oblique confession, probing soliloquy, travel narrative, social and philosophical observations, and early-romantic landscape description reveal uncommon mental acuity and a casual, private charm not apparent in her more formal polemical works. Her interest in the novel environment of Scandinavia helped diffuse the pain of Imlay's infidelity, and her personal preoccupations gave an ironic, introspective quality to the work's conventional letter-diary form. Her situation was of course eccentric: few foreigners traveled in eighteenth-century Scandinavia, but fewer still were single women with infants, there to arrange shipping contracts for men who had deserted them. No more devoted mother risked her child's life on dangerous ocean trips, no more fervent believer in future progress inventoried her displeasure at the irrational present—unventilated rooms, mummification, decayed teeth, thieving proprietors, eiderdown beds in wood box frames ("It seemed to me that I was sinking into a grave . . ."), interminable dinners, general insipidity. She took wry, at times acerbic interest in the juxtaposition of exalted reveries and the plain presentation of the senses:

The huge shadows of the rocks, fringed with firs, concentrating the views, without darkening them, excited that tender melancholy which, sublimating the imagination, exalts rather than depresses the mind.

My companions fell asleep: —fortunately they did not snore. . . . (Pp. 50–51)

The introduction reveals a shrewd self-awareness; at first she had tried to arrange her notes into a formal narrative, she recounts, but the style became "stiff and affected."

I perceived that I could not give a just description of what I saw, but by relating the effects different objects had produced on my mind and feelings, whilst the impression was still fresh.

Her formally "political" comments—on the Danish king's imbecility and Bernstorff's liberal reforms—are by comparison secondhand and platitudinous. Her most fervent topical effusions concern the dead Queen Matilde, who as George III's mistreated sister had inspired British sympathy; and her pro-French sympathies caused her to underestimate anti-Republicanism in southern coastal Norway. Her responses to immediate experience are much more original—sudden empathetic emotions (of trees: "I could scarcely conceive that they were without some consciousness of existence—without a calm enjoyment of the pleasure they diffused"), moments of intense self-awareness or oblique prescience (viewing barren rocks she images a future world struggling with Malthusian overpopulation), and others of quick, almost rhapsodic asperity (of East Rusoer: "Talk not of bastilles! To be born here, was to be bastilled by nature . . ."), or vanity and unconscious absurdity:

. . . yes; I am persuaded that I have formed a very just opinion of the character of the Norwegians, without being able to hold converse with them. (P. 78)

Energetic subjectiveness creates a believable narrative; although the reader remains rather vague about Swedish/Norwegian/Danish economic geography, or senses uneasily an occasional boundary that may have been crossed without notice, her style conveys with immediacy how it must have felt to be an aggressive, critical Englishwoman in the far north. Two centuries later I feel an urge to visit East Rusoer (now Risör)—can it have been that bleakly desolate?

In several ways the *Letters* exhibit traits of literary Romanticism. Thomas Percy's translation from the French of Paul Henry Mallet's *Northern Antiquities* had introduced the English reader in 1770 to early Scandinavian history and saga literature, but Wollstonecraft deserves a modest place in the history of Romantic thought for her publication of the first description of a northern journey. The mysterious subjective emotion of her narrative also suggests Sterne—she compares herself in fact to his Maria—while her persona as unhappy wanderer and her response to stark, desolate, remote, and wild Scandinavian scenery anticipates the later preoccupation with the antipodal barren wastes of her daughter's *Frankenstein*.

The romanticism is not irrationalism; she dissents energetically from Rousseau's idealization of primitive life, as in *A Vindication* she had attacked his view that women should be seductively mindless servants. There is a strong Romantic enthusiasm for unrefurbished Gothic churches, natural gardens, forests at night, and dark caves; even as she leaves the unpleasant confinement of East Rusoer she comments on its landscape:

Before I came here, I could scarcely have imagined that a simple object, rocks, could have admitted of so many interesting combinations—always grand, and often sublime. (P. 107)

In the presence of uncultivated nature she often employs the language of organic sympathy and profound reverence, and her style becomes both more elaborate and more graceful in its attempt to convey depth of feeling. Several times she comments on the inextricable fusion of pleasure and pain in human emotion; there is even an Aeolian harp image:

. . . the harmonized soul sinks into melancholy, or rises to ecstasy, just as the chords are touched, like the aeolian harp agitated by the changing winds. (P. 58)

She expresses a religious sense of the inner fusion of all existence:

. . . I was alone, till some involuntary sympathetic emotion, like the attraction of adhesion, made me feel that I was still a part of a mighty whole, from which I could not sever myself. . . . (P. 17)

Yet the stark landscapes also intensify the sense of her own living consciousness and individuality; it is chilling to realize that the woman who wrote

I cannot bear to think of being no more—of losing myself—though existence is often but a painful consciousness of misery; nay, it appears to me impossible that I should cease to exist, or that this active, restless spirit, equally alive to joy and sorrow, should only be organized dust. . . . Surely something resides in this heart that is not perishable—and life is more than a dream. (P. 76)

would be dead within two years, that as she wrote this energetic travel narrative she was also composing the painful *Letters to Imlay*, and that on returning to England she would attempt suicide by throwing herself from Putney Bridge. As most of her life would testify, she had robust recuperative powers; her composition of the Scandinavian letters edits out enough despair so that she is presented as a successful Romantic heroine with painful memories of a mysterious past, and an adventurous, courageous present, a kind of wry and plain-spoken Manfred.

For the first and last time one of Mary Wollstonecraft's books was favorably and widely reviewed; William Godwin's famous judgment in the *Memoirs*, "If ever there was a book calculated to make a man in love with its author, this appears to me to be the book,"¹ was only the extreme expression of a general admiration, and accurately conveyed the emotional, personal interest with which the *Letters* were received. The formerly hostile *Critical Review*, after emphasizing that in the past Wollstonecraft had been "not always correct either in her sentiment or her style," praised the "lively interest which is excited by this artless and apparently unstudied species of composition";² the *Monthly Review* exuded warmth and sympathy for the author herself:

She claims the traveller's privilege of speaking frequently of herself, but she uses it in a manner which always interests her readers: who may sometimes regret the circumstances which excite the writer's emotion, but will seldom see reason to censure her feelings, and will never be inclined to withhold their sympathy.³

The reviewer especially commended several passages for their "glow of sensibility," "lively fancy," and "tender (perhaps morbid) sensibility." The *Analytical Review's* warm glow of sensibility surpassed the duties of friendly partisanship: its reviewer "O. S." carefully expressed concern about the author's personal situation,

¹ Godwin, *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. W. Clark Durant (New York and London, 1927), p. 84.

² *Critical Review*, New Arrangement, 16 (1796), 209, 210.

³ *Monthly Review*, NS 20 (1796), 252.

We are sorry to add, that these letters, while they afford many proofs, that the writer is not more distinguished by strength of understanding than by delicacy of sensibility, also discover, that her feeling heart has suffered deeply from some recent affliction.⁴

then added his own laments to hers:

We are certain that no reader, who possessed any portion of sensibility, will be able to peruse the preceding passage without deeply deploring the state of society, in which it is possible that such a mind should be loaded with such distress,—without exclaiming "*O world, thy slippery turns.*"⁵

Supported by such readers, she was not entirely alone. The *Letters* continued to attract; not only were they translated into Dutch, German, and Portuguese, but Johnson published a second edition in 1802, and as late as 1889 they appeared in Cassell's National Library.

Travel narrative was an unusually suitable form for Wollstonecraft's digressive and passionate genius, since it forced her to order her meditations and description into small frames which she often composed with unusual grace. Her need to describe concretely what she saw muted a tendency toward disconnected abstraction which had sometimes marred her topical works, and the letter-diary form facilitated her expression of a temperament that ranged in its versatility from droll practicality and physical courage to high poetic seriousness. Her style in the *Letters* had improved over earlier works, either from practice or because of the congeniality of the subject, and there is a sharp sadness in the fact that Mary Wollstonecraft did not live into the next century to infuse the early Romanticism she anticipated in many ways with her energetic conscience and feminist bias. One cannot help wondering how she would have fused her political and personal impulses with the sensibilities of a new decade.

In 1970, seventy-five years after its last reprinting, *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* was issued in a facsimile edition by Centaur Press in Sussex, and an American reprint has at last been published by the University of Nebraska Press. Carol H. Poston, its editor, has provided a useful critical and biographical introduction, as well as annotations and a map which enables the reader to follow Wollstonecraft's journey. The *Letters* are strikingly well written, and could be used in courses on Romanticism, travel literature, or autobiography, as well as the history of feminist thought. Unjustly consigned to obscurity for generations, they are the most impressive personal expression of part of her life's experience by an intense, courageous, and clear-sighted woman.

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⁴ *Analytical Review*, 23 (1796), 236.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 237.