BURROWS, Simon — *Blackmail, Scandal, and Revolution: London's French libellistes, 1758–92*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006. Pp. 256.

Few debates in our discipline are as long-standing or as central as that concerning the origins of the French Revolution. Simon Burrows's *Blackmail, Scandal, and Revolution: London's French libellistes, 1758–92* is intended as an intervention in this debate. It is most particularly a challenge to the arguments of the so-called "pornographic school" — a chorus of historians, led by Robert Darnton, Lynn Hunt, and Sara Maza, who have collectively argued for the role that the scandalous writings of a literary underground played in the collapse of the *ancien régime*.

Many of these scandalous writings — *libelles* — were produced in London, thus providing Burrows with the opportunity for his study. His aim is to profile the networks of these London *libellistes* and to relate their history to pre-revolutionary developments. Chapter 1, a thorough prosopography of the 16 known *libellistes*, makes for a colourful start. Defrocked priests, aristocratic pretenders, and the cross-dressing Chevalier d'Eon compete for attention in a collective biography determined to overturn the earlier characterizations suggested by Robert Darnton. What Darnton viewed previously as a group of genuine revolutionaries nursed by frustrated literary ambitions, Burrows reveals to be a disproportionately female group of criminals, debtors, successful writers, and literary hacks, almost none of whom turned out to be genuinely Jacobin when the moment arrived.

Chapter 2 proceeds in a similar vein. *Pace* Darnton, Burrows argues that London's French publishing networks were not political backwaters, that London-based *libellistes* were connected to court factions, that the timing of most slanders on Marie-Antoinette does not allow them a causative role in the revolutionary crisis of 1789, and that those *libelles* that were published served a restorative and legitimizing purpose in *ancien régime* politics. Chapters 3 and 4, although separated chronologically, cover a common ground, revealing in considerable detail the dynamics of production, dissemination, and suppression. This is done through a series of narrative case studies that reveal the French government's response to successive blackmail attempts and *libelles*. Not surprisingly, the government's response to particular *libelles* appears to have depended on perceptions of their seriousness, estimations of the credibility and capability of the *libelliste*, and calculations by individual ministers (often concerning the threat to themselves). But Burrows detects a shift — from about 1783, the government tended to disregard, prosecute, or pursue *libellistes*, rather than paying to suppress publication. This was a perhaps natural response to the emerging reality that submitting to a blackmailer's threats of publication tended to result in more blackmail attempts!

By the very nature of the subject, most of Burrows's chapters make interesting reading. The winner in this regard, by far, is chapter 5, on the scandalous history of the *libelles* against Marie-Antoinette. Here it is not the nature of the subject

matter being discussed that engages the reader's interest, but the scale of Burrows's assault on the "pornographic school." An involved course of research (embracing survival rates in library collections, a more detailed understanding of the provenance of the pamphlet runs held in French archives, and comparative suppositions) leads him to advance the "hypothesis that anti-Marie-Antoinette texts did not circulate before the revolution" (p. 149). "The scores of hostile pamphlets required to justify a pornographic interpretation of the origins of the revolution simply did not exist" (p. 151). The scandalous pamphlets attacking the Queen, he argues, were published after the outbreak of the Revolution in 1789, often using the texts of previously suppressed *libelles* that the royal government had secreted in the Bastille. As for the content of those *libelles* that did circulate prior to 1789, in chapter 6 Burrows examines them to refute Darnton's widely accepted arguments concerning the "desacralisation" of the monarchy. The *libelles*, he finds, can be primarily understood as situational interventions in the ministerial politicking of the pre-revolutionary period.

Throughout the period, in its efforts against *libellistes*, the French government was handicapped by the contradictions of an absolutist state seeking to control French nationals who were exercising their British freedom. This creates the opening for some of the analysis Burrows presents in his final chapter 7. If the *libelles* did not desacralize the monarchy, what did they do? Burrows's answer is that they firmly underlined France's image as despotic in the eyes of audiences both foreign and domestic. The royal government's pursuit of *libellistes* reminded everyone — French notables, French exiles, the British public, foreign booksellers — that freedoms enjoyed in Britain did not exist in France. This affected, Burrows argues, the self-identity of the French elite in the years before 1789, and British national identity throughout the period.

Burrows's detailed detective work means that *Blackmail, Scandal, and Revolution* lives up to the promise of its title, and the empiricists' challenge to the "pornographic school" needs to be taken seriously. But the book is not without its impediments. First among them is the focus on revisionism, which not only inflects the book with a highly disputatious tone, but also governs its organization to the point that some of Burrows's more original ideas are occluded. Differences and disagreements with other scholars, Darnton in particular, are flagged so frequently, and feature so prominently in the individual chapter structures, that Burrows's own arguments about pre-revolutionary culture are left underdeveloped and are presented relatively late in the book. Secondly, while Burrows is to be commended for the apparently painstaking research that allowed him to assemble his prosopographies and uncover a more accurate publication history of the *libelles*, the descent into detail comes at some cost in terms of the wider context. This study would have benefited from fuller discussions of two contexts in particular — London's wider exile community and the foreign French publishing trade.

Unquestionably, Burrows has made a contribution to the debate on the origins of the French Revolution. It is to be hoped that in future work he takes up some of the questions raised but not answered by his provocative and spirited book.

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DAVIES, Peter — *The Debate on the French Revolution*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006. Pp. 210.

R. C. Richardson's *The Debate on the English Revolution*, which was first published in 1977, is an important work that provides an essential framework for understanding the complex historiographical debates surrounding that event. Peter Davies's book is designed to fulfil the same function for the French Revolution. Its appearance, and the promise of similar studies on the American and Russian Revolutions, offers the prospect of interesting comparisons. Unfortunately, however, Davies's book suffers from several flaws.

The series as a whole is aimed at undergraduates. With this audience in mind, Davies sets out "to unpack the ideas of the key historians, to discover what they said about the Revolution and how they said it" (p. 8). The work is divided chronologically, with Part I focused on the nineteenth century and Part II on the twentieth. Across this chronological divide Davies notes the distinction between the "Great Tradition" — which presented the Revolution in a positive light — and an alternative, more critical tradition encompassing the works of Tocqueville, Taine, Cobban, and Furet.

The first chapter deals with the reflections of contemporaries, and here is the first of several editorial slips. The introduction suggests that Burke, de Maistre, and de Staël will all be considered in this chapter, whereas in fact de Staël is discussed alongside the early liberal writers in chapter 2. There are more serious problems with Davies's account of Burke. No mention is made of the latter's support for the American Revolution, which is clearly of relevance for anyone seeking to explain his attitude towards the French Revolution. There is also no mention of Price's *A Discourse on the Love of our Country* to which Burke's *Reflections* was a response. Finally, though the works of Wollstonecraft and Paine are mentioned, there is no indication that they formed part of an enormous pamphlet war inspired by Burke's book.

Chapter 2 focuses on what Davies sees as the first proper "school" of revolutionary historiography, involving de Staël, Thiers, and Mignet, which exemplified a liberal, bourgeois approach. The remaining three chapters of Part I deal respectively with "Idealist and Romantic" interpretations (Carlyle, Michelet, Guizot, and Quinet), the works of Tocqueville, and the historians of the Third Republic (Taine and Aulard).

For historians today, the emergence of the Marxist interpretation of the Revolution, and its adoption as the orthodoxy, is so much a part of the