

Review Article

France's Conception of the Past

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Pierre Nora (ed.), *Realms of Memory: The Reconstruction of the French Past, II: Traditions*, Columbia University Press, 1997, pp. xii + 591, \$43.00/£29.95.

It can be said at once and with confidence that this book is very good value for money. Each chapter offers penetrating insights and a wealth of fascinating information. The pictures are more than mere illustrations of the text: they make their own contribution to its message. The book is sure to bring enjoyment and profit to readers interested in France or her people.

To define what the book is about is a more difficult task, with which there is little help to be obtained from four pages of largely unintelligible introduction. The problem possibly arises from the fact that the book seems to stand on its own yet is actually the second volume of a trilogy in the process of being published. The original version of the whole work appeared in French in 1992 under the title *Lieux de Mémoire*. Information supplied by the publisher of the English translation describes the trilogy as an investigation into 'how and why events and figures become part of a people's collective memory' and thereby contribute towards its identity. The first volume dealt with the history of political, social and cultural differences within French society; the volume to hand uncovers 'the roots of French identity'; and a third volume will consider terms such as 'Eiffel Tower', 'Bastille Day' and 'Joan of Arc' that convey an immediate impression of Frenchness whenever they are uttered. Reading the second volume makes one want to rush

out and order the others in order to savour their content and grapple with their meaning.

The two halves of the overall title, *Realms of Memory* and *The Construction of the French Past*, indicate a dichotomy. The act of remembering, though it can sometimes be triggered off deliberately, is essentially natural, whereas construction is an artificial process. Contributors to the volume under review are continually aware that the genuine remembrance of events is individual and unreliable: a nation's so-called *collective* memory, it seems, arises not from a conglomeration of personal recollections but from widespread acceptance of the meaning that has been attributed to past events by historians, novelists, artists, advertisers, journalists, teachers, preachers, politicians and others who tell people what to think. The volume consists of fourteen chapters, each by a distinguished author (or, in one case, pair of authors). The first three chapters, under the heading of 'Models', deal with features which the French, regardless of personal experience, have come to regard as having played a fundamental part in the development of society as they know it: namely, the land, the cathedral, and the court. The next four chapters discuss a group of widely read texts on which opinion has changed from time to time, making them into 'living portraits of French identity'. The texts chosen for this purpose are the one-time favourite children's book, *Le Tour de France par deux enfants*; the *Petit Lavis* along with its author's voluminous *Histoire de France*; Vidal de la Blanche's classic *Geography of France*; and Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, translated into English with the rather different title, *The Remembrance of Things Past*. The remaining seven chapters of the volume are devoted to 'Singularities' – particular manifestations of French cultural attitudes. These range from the Académie Française to the naming of streets, and from the eloquence associated with church pulpits, political rostrums and law courts to the significance of War Memorials, the myth of the peasant-soldier Chauvin, the Tour de France, and the French claim to gastronomic preeminence.

Styles understandably differ. The first chapter, on the land, is slightly repetitive; it also, along with several others, makes too much use of the un-English expression 'to be sure'. The essays on the Academy and on Eloquence demand an erudite readership: even the title of the former, *La Coupole*, will not immediately be understood by the uninitiated. Most of the chapters, however, are clear and seductive if not always entirely convincing; and the volume as a whole is pleasantly free from jargon. The approach is not at all nationalistic: this is not a book in praise of things French but, rather, an attempt to understand how and why they have come to be regarded as characteristically French, not by foreigners but by the French themselves. The writer on gastronomy is not concerned with whether or not French cuisine is better than that of other nations, but only with how the claim arose.

There is much entertainment to be had from the book, but the reader is left with a sense of unease, arising from the unreality and impermanence of

things long taken for granted. France has never really been a land of peasant proprietors, secure in the possession of their farms from generation to generation. Peasants had to fight long and hard, first against the rights of noble landlords, then against incursions from urban speculators, and finally, as the population on the land increased, against rivals in their own ranks. Nor was their life ever ideal: more often than not, they lived in grinding poverty. Since the end of World War II, peasant farms have been absorbed, on the one hand by second-home owners who cultivate not fields for foodstuffs but gardens for pleasure, and on the other by experts who have made France into a major exporter of agricultural produce. Not until this had begun to happen were the virtues of independence and honest toil, believed to be inherent in peasant ownership, widely extolled. The last set of economic statistics mentioned in the chapter relates to 1986. What has happened over the years that followed, and what is likely to happen in the future? In similar vein, we are told that French cathedrals, supposedly created by the seventy-two disciples mentioned in the Gospels and long regarded as a potent sign of continuity, have had various origins and suffered chequered careers. Their use as a backcloth for royal occasions brought vengeance upon them during the Revolution, when many were put to profane uses. They came to be valued as a part of France's national heritage when nineteenth-century poets and artists claimed Gothic to be the quintessential French style; but what is likely to be their future in an age when their spiritual message is seldom appreciated, even by the faithful, and when popes and presidents need vast arenas in which to address the crowds? Meanwhile the court of Versailles was irrevocably destroyed by the Revolution. Stories of the life led there have nevertheless continued to fascinate scholars and public alike, and there are rumours of survivals in the political style adopted by leaders of the French Republic. It is not clear whether the writer of the chapter regards such survivals, if they exist, as a good sign for the future or the reverse.

The same uncertainty hovers over the 'singularities' treated in the final section. In the seventeenth century, the triumph of the Moderns in their famous quarrel with the Ancients enabled the Academy to absorb the Enlightenment when it came; but the subsequent determination of its members to stick to 'history, poetry and eloquence' as its definition of literature marginalised its influence when the novel stole the favour of the reading public in the nineteenth century. The original aim of the Academy was to bring all forms of culture under its guiding hand and to standardise the language in which they were expressed. What role lies in store for it in a society increasingly dominated by specialisms conducted in a variety of technical jargons? This is a question which we are told must remain unanswered. Eloquence, though still spoken of with admiration, has become chiefly the concern of moral philosophers who puzzle over the best means of communication between citizens of the Republic. The 'good soldier Chauvin', though less venerable than either of the two former 'singularities', has adopted many guises. He is now seen as

a vehicle for sexist, racist and xenophobic violence, and 'the myth' of his prowess has consequently been eliminated, we are told, 'from the selective memory of the French' – but not without trace. Ominously, the outrageous fellow now and again still speaks for the nation. The Tour de France, which was once important for promoting pride in France's territorial extent, technical expertise and physical endurance, lives on only because it has learnt to look inwards at its own history. Gastronomy alone is promised a bright future, thanks to a typical French tendency to take seriously activities elsewhere regarded as trivial.

There is surprisingly little mention either of the Revolution or of Napoleon: the individual most often mentioned in the volume is Louis XIV. The Grand Monarch would appear to have been the founding father of the French nation. In the Introduction, however, we are warned against reaching any such conclusion. Many of the items discussed in the volume had roots in the age of Louis XIV, and even earlier, but popular conceptions of them were formulated only in the nineteenth century. In these circumstances, the term 'memory' would seem to be misleading. 'Traditions', the term used in the title to the volume, is more accurate. 'False traditions' would be more accurate still.

The fourteen chapters between them touch on every aspect of French culture, especially art, literature and history. Using literature to mean fiction (*pace* the Academy), the novel may be said to have emerged as more important than history in manufacturing France's traditions. Novelists from Balzac onwards have written about the beauty of the landscape, but few historians have 'bothered' to analyse its features. It was a novel, Victor Hugo's *Notre Dame de Paris*, which established the image of French cathedrals that dominated the nineteenth century. Popular ideas of the court of Versailles were, and still are, based on anecdotes from contemporary literature. Of the four 'texts' discussed in the middle chapters of the book, Lavissee's monumental work is shown to have been influential, but no more so than Mme Fouillée's 'Little Red Book of the Republic'. The eminent historian's image of France, conceived at a time when the Republic needed to establish its credentials, seemed increasingly outdated after World War I, whereas Proust's fictional masterpiece has grown rapidly in public esteem. Historians at one time welcomed the *Recherche* for the importance it attached to the past. In fact, a novel which sees memory as analogous to a Celtic spirit, locked in a tree until accidentally released, does little service to the historian, who prefers to believe that a substitute for memory can be created from the records of past times.