LIVING THE FRENCH REVOLUTION:
A symposium in honour of Peter McPhee
9-10 July, 2019
Forum Theatre, Arts West, The University of Melbourne
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Presented by the Faculty of Arts,
The University of Melbourne
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Why is the French Revolution still relevant today, 230 years after the fall of the Bastille? The Living Revolution symposium will explore this question. Celebrating the career of the great revolutionary historian, Emeritus Professor Peter McPhee AM, the symposium takes its name from a key dimension of his work—the experience of ordinary people living through extraordinary times, from rural peasants to Maximilien Robespierre. More than a dozen leading experts from around the world—one of the largest gatherings of revolutionary historians ever in Australia—will trace McPhee’s legacy across a range of current topics in historical scholarship, from emotions, war and the “Terror”, to global networks and environmental degradation. This symposium will offer an unparalleled opportunity to gain an up-to-the-minute picture of one of history’s most dramatic events, and to learn more about one of Australia’s great historians.

Acknowledgment of Country

We respectfully acknowledge the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation as the traditional and continuing custodians of the land on which this symposium will take place. We pay our respect to Elders past, present and emerging, and through them, to all Indigenous Australians.


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Keynote

John Merriman (Yale University), Misery, Hope, and Terrorism in Paris during the Belle Epoque that Wasn’t

I will consider Anarchism and Anarchist terrorists in Fin-de-Siecle Paris, in the ‘Belle Epoque that Wasn’t’. Most anarchists of course were not terrorists, but some among the ‘illegalist’ faction were. Two of my heroes were not. I will follow Victor Kibalchiche (later Victor Serge) and Rirette Maitrejean, anarchist ideologues and peaceful people, and their relations to opposition to the Bonnot Gang, which terrorized Paris and its environs, 1911-12. And I will ask who really had the power of violence in these years?

Public Lecture

Timothy Tackett (University of California – Irvine), Living in Paris during the French Revolution: The Story of an Ordinary Citizen

Under ordinary circumstances, the life of Adrien-Joseph Colson (1727-1797), before and during the French Revolution, would be totally unknown and forgotten. A petty lawyer residing in Paris, he never held any positions of authority, he never published any newspapers or pamphlets; he was never a member of a Revolutionary club. But nevertheless, he did write over a thousand letters to a friend in the provinces that have been almost miraculously preserved and that provide a remarkable account of his experiences. His correspondence is particularly fascinating in that it serves not only as a record of his own life but of that of his neighbours and his neighbourhood in the very centre of Paris where he lived. The paper will provide an overview of his biography, with particular emphasis on what it reveals of the intense emotions generated by the rumours, the denunciations, and the panic that swept through his neighbourhood and measurably affected the dynamics of the Revolution.

Session 1

Caroline Ford (University of California – Los Angeles), Fixing the Dunes: Nicolas Brémontier, Reforestation and Environmental Regeneration during the French Revolution

This paper will focus on the spectre of drifting sands in the region surrounding Bordeaux and a key effort to stabilize the shifting dunes in the landes of Gascony by the engineer Nicolas Brémontier during the French Revolution. It explores the place of sand drift in the French environmental imagination during the Revolution and how the planting of maritime pines responded to specific climatic and hydrological anxieties, leading to the formation of a totally new landscape. Finally, it examines how these French land reclamation projects became a model for engineers and forest officials in Europe, Australia and India later in the nineteenth century.

Rod Phillips (Carleton University), Living Revolution, Drinking Revolution: Wine and Politics in the 1790s

Wine represented a challenge to those who promoted an egalitarian society in an inclusive and unified France. First, by the time of the Revolution a clear differentiation was made between the small volumes of quality wines (often known as vins bourgeois or grands vins) that were crafted for elite palates, and the ocean of mediocre and poor wines (vins de boisson) that were destined for the mouths of the masses. Second, some wine regions (notably Burgundy, Bordeaux, and Champagne) had emerged as more prestigious than others and there was already a ranking of the finest Bordeaux wines, a precursor of the famous 1855 Classification. Third, the way that terror was conceived in the eighteenth-century privileged regions over the nation. This paper explores some of the ways Revolutionaries confronted the distinctions among wines based on their perceived quality, their reputation and prestige, and their regional provenance, while promoting wine as a good commodity in itself.
Hamish Graham (Western Sydney University – The College), ‘Forced against our will to make a report’: The nature of woodland property and the problems of policing forests in eighteenth-century France

In the 1990s Simon Schama joined a long line of commentators and scholars who deplored the effects of the French Revolution on the well-being of France’s forests. Yet in the years that followed the storming of the Bastille, encroachments in royal, seigneurial or ecclesiastical woodlands, and the upsurge of popular antagonism towards forestry officials and charcoal-fired industries, were by no means uniform across France. Nor were these outbursts confined to the revolutionary period. Recurrent tensions and conflicts over woodland resources were documented across the eighteenth century, as revealed by a sample of the first-hand reports compiled between the 1720s and 1790s by forest guards from the South-West. Of course, these sources gave prominence to the aims and assumptions of the men who enforced the king’s laws on trees and timber. In this paper I consider how these officials’ effectiveness was shaped by the nature of woodland property, where various rights of ownership or access were associated with rather different forms and rates of contention.

Session 2

Sophie Matthiesson (National Gallery of Victoria), Celebrating the Revolution in the prisons of the Terror

This talk considers the political prison of the Terror as a setting for collective patriotic culture. Arrested suspects found themselves obliged to adapt to the impacts of external political events in the prisons of 1793 and 1794, but this was not an entirely reactive process. Despite their necessary focus on daily survival and their physical exclusion from the wider population, suspect communities were not disconnected from political culture at large and continued to have a stake in the broader project of the Revolution. Many found ways of materially transforming their communal prison spaces in solidarity with the republic’s aims. Overwhelmingly, the factor that most structured symbolic life within political prisons was the same as that which structured symbolic life outside them – the revolutionary calendar of patriotic festivals. Attuned to their singular historic nature, imprisoned artists and writers sought to document and contribute to the celebration of many of these festivals but paid most attention to the celebration of the Festival of the Supreme Being (8 June 1794), an event rumoured to herald an imminent amnesty. This talk presents a group of prison-made paintings and drawings of the 8 June celebrations (some of them never until now identified as depictions of this festival) and explores what they meant for the captive revolutionary subjects for whom they had been made.

Ian Germani (University of Regina), Dying for Liberty: Attitudes Toward Death in the French Revolutionary Wars

In the late eighteenth century, attitudes toward death became less Christian and more sentimental; the dead themselves were increasingly set apart from the living. The French Revolution disrupted this cultural change as mass death on the battlefield restored the intimacy between the living and the dead in troubling ways. Politics required personal feelings to be set aside. Images of soldiers’ deaths represented them as a willing sacrifice for freedom. Soldiers’ writings reinforced this message, although some reflected the new attitude toward death, expressing sorrow at the loss of comrades. Finally, Baltaz’s The Death of Colonel Chabert provides a revealing commentary on the pragmatic response of French society to wartime mortality on a new scale.

Kieko Matteson (University of Hawai`i – Mānoa), Making the Murdered Live Again: Writing the Rural Revolution through Stories of Conflict

On a cold winter evening in 1813, two imperial forest guards in eastern France set out to find the perpetrators of a timber theft. The next morning, both men were found dead, their bodies barely recognizable from the blows they’d received. What could explain their deaths and the ferocity with which they were slain? Probing the tensions between competing forest users – from widows, shepherds, woodcutters, and wood-powered manufactures where the murders occurred, to the naval and military interests of the area – our talk explores how the deaths of these guards in peril.

Sanjay Subrahmanyan (University of California – Los Angeles), Stumbling Across Two (and a Half) Revolutions: A Franco-Irish Experience

This paper will be largely centred on the figure of Thomas Conway (1735-1800), a Franco-Irish military officer and political figure. Born in County Kerry, Ireland, Conway was recruited into the French army where he served in the Clare Regiment and fought in the Seven Years’ War. In the 1770s, he then served under Washington in America, but was disgraced and dismissed. However, he managed to rebuild his career in the Cape Colony and Pondicherry (as governor), before returning to France to command Counter- Revolutionary forces in 1792. His career thus spans several continents, and even includes a brief foray into the politics of Vietnam.

Ian Coller (University of California – Irvine), What can a Muslim citizen tell us about the French Revolution?

In 1799 the commissioner of the Seine et Marne wrote to his superiors that “Michel Fertal, subject of the Ottoman Porte,” was living in the rural canton of Chaumes-sur-Brie, near Melun. This Muslim, the commissioner added, ‘has made the declaration necessary to enjoy the rights of a French citizen, after the law prescribed by the constitution.’ This is the first historical evidence of a Muslim citizen of France. The otherwise unremarkable process by which he came to be a citizen speaks to the great transformation that had taken place across a decade. At the same time, his life and itinerary can point toward new ways of thinking about the Revolution itself, and the geographical and political frames in which we have understood it.

Allan Patry (University of Paris – Diderot), Owning the Capital: the State and Parisan Society in the 17th and 18th Centuries

‘This century struggles with great difficulty to finish the smallest construction project... but to each his own moment in time. Ours is that of innumerable planning, whereas yours (in the year 2440) will be one of execution.’ Louis Sébastien Mercier, L’Année 2440 (1772).

Mercier was one of many exaggerated Enlightenment-era voices commenting on the monarchy’s incapacity to construct ambitious architectural projects worthy of the City of Light. For by the end of the old regime, the divorce between the ambition to make Paris a “new Rome” confronted a grim reality: the capital city suffered a sharp decline in the quality of life of its inhabitants. Quotidian problems including crowded, housing shortages, crumbling infrastructure, and environmental pollution, provoked a generalized sense of sustained crisis. The calamitous effects of disorganized urban development made it sure that the eighteenth century exposed the retreat of the state in urban matters. My paper will examine several controversies that provoked an increasingly politicized and critical discourse about the monarchy’s failure to protect the health and well-being of urban inhabitants. In Paris, the new regime, embodied by the French Revolution, was physically and ideologically built on the ruins of the old regime.

Donald Sutherland (University of Maryland), Louis-Napoléon and the Left: Democratic Traditions in the Rural Mâconnais, 1848-1914

The aim of this paper is to test the thesis that the elections of the Second Republic, especially those of 13 May 1849, established (or revealed) a continuity of voting preferences that continued down to the late twentieth century. Yet, as the experience of the Mâconnais region in Eastern France shows, there were distinct peaks, or rather families of elections from 1848 until at least 1914. One was a Bonapartist family (1848 to 1869-70), and a republican (1871 to 1914). Interestingly, there is no correlation with the socialist vote in 1885 and the family of republican elections after the fall of the Second Empire (1870).

Greg Burgess (Deakin University), Remembering Rights: Completing the work of 1789 in the post-Second World War Declarations

Often given little attention in readings of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen of August 1789, its preamble proclaims that “the ignorance, neglect, or contempt of the rights of man are the sole cause of public calamities and of the corruption of governments.” The Declaration and the Revolution that it inspired were a return to the natural order of things. In 1845, the First Constituent Assembly ‘remembered’ these natural rights when the French people had declared their liberty from Nazi oppression. Following the program for a more free and equal society prepared by the National Resistance Council in 1943, the Constituent quite consciously set out to complete the work of 1789 by defining new principles of rights, liberty and equality for sure, but equality based on social and economic rights. This project ended in failure, which proved the extreme difficulty of defining social and economic rights. Yet the principles of a new Declaration of Rights endured because they were later expressed in the preamble of the 1946 Constitution as general aspirational rights that reflected the modern age. They were also the basis of René Cassin’s program for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This paper reflects upon the ‘remembering of rights’ in the wake of the Second World War and the new rhetoric of rights at this period, the values they expressed and their role in shaping a new republican order in France and universal rights in the United Nations.
Vesna Drapac (University of Adelaide), The most godless village in France? Filmic Representation of Religion during the Occupation  

There is general agreement that filmic evocations of France’s ‘dark years’ have had an impact on the scholarly literature. For example, nuanced and controversial portrayals of collaboration on film contributed to the demise of the so-called resistance myth both in popular culture and in the historiography. However, the filmic representation of religion during the occupation is rarely nuanced and generally predictable. I argue that this is also true of the historiography of French Catholics in the war. My paper considers why this is the case and suggests ways of addressing the problem. It takes as its starting point the portrayal of religion in the television series, Un village français, and in other iconic films depicting life during the Occupation.

Session 5

Marisa Linton (Kingston University), The Sea-Green Incorruptible and the Archangel of Death: How narratives of the French Revolution contrast the roles of Robespierre and Saint-Just  

This talk will look at two leading figures of the French Revolution, Maximilien Robespierre and Louis-Antoine Saint-Just, and how their reputations have been presented in fictionalised narratives: popular histories, literature, theatre and cinema. Such narrative accounts typically present these two revolutionaries as having held strongly contrasting attitudes towards tactics and the ethics of using violence in the cause of sustaining the Revolution. Saint-Just is frequently portrayed as a pitiless and ruthless proponent of terror, a foil against which to contrast Robespierre’s more conscience-stricken responses. Inevitably Saint-Just’s logic wins the argument, whilst Robespierre’s humanity suffers. Their choices are often depicted in personal as well as political terms, focussing on the pivotal question of whether friendship or commitment to the Revolution was more important, as in the so-called ‘Danton Affair’. Yet in life these men worked closely together and shared many, though not all, attitudes towards policy and tactics. This talk will ask to what extent the narrative of contrasts was part of a ‘mythologisation’ of the nature of Revolution, intended to show Robespierre’s lingering humanity gradually crushed out of existence when confronted with the inexorable logic of revolutionary politics. This talk draws on material for which I am currently working for a book on Robespierre, Danton, Desmoulins and Saint-Just, entitled Saturn’s Children: Leaders of the French Revolution, to be published by Oxford University Press.

Charles Walton, (University of Warwick), The French Revolution: A Matter of Circumstances?  

This paper discusses the thesis of circumstances and the role it has played in debates over the French Revolution. It examines how the thesis has been invoked to explain – and explain away – revolutionary violence ever since the Revolution itself. One of the problems with the thesis is that, ultimately, it can only describe, not explain. In focusing on particular people and events, historians must necessarily eschew systematic theories of causation. But despite the limitations of ‘circumstances’, historians cannot dispense with them without lapsing into reductive ‘systems’ of explanation. Circumstances are the lifeblood of history, which is more artisanal than scientific.

Laura Mason (Johns Hopkins University), The Trial of Gracchus Babeuf and the End of the French Revolution  

In 1797, the republican government of the Directory charged the radical Gracchus Babeuf and 64 retired soldiers with conspiring to overthrow the present regime and reignite the Terror. During the widely-publicized trial that followed, prosecutors and defendants linked guilt or innocence to the very nature of the republic. Was democracy possible in a nation of 28 million? Could popular activism be reconciled with civil peace? Might political opposition be something more than treason? This case illuminates the polarization that haunted the French Revolution’s final years, hollowing the republic until it collapsed to the ambitions of Napoleon Bonaparte.
Dr Sophie Matthiesson is a curator of European art at the National Gallery of Victoria. She was the Melbourne curator of the 2014 blockbuster exhibition Monet’s Garden, and a contributing curator to numerous other exhibitions including, most recently, Dogos: A New Vision (2016) and Van Gogh and the Seasons (2017). She completed her doctorate on the prison-made object in the French Revolution at Monash University in 2016, supervised by Prof. David Garrooch. She has contributed a chapter on miniature portraits in the French Revolutionary Prison for the forthcoming book, Life in Revolutionary France (Bloomsbury Publishing) edited by Jennifer N. Heuer and Mette Harder. She is convening the forum on revolutionary culture for the 2019 Hi-France Salon, ‘230 Years After: What does the French Revolution mean Today’.

Dr. Ian Germani received his Ph.D. from Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario in 1983 and has taught at the University of Regina in Saskatchewan, Canada, for over thirty years. His research has focused on war and culture in French history, with an emphasis on the Soldier’s Death.

Kieko Matteson, an avid birder, hiker, and aspiring naturalist, teaches environmental history at the University of Hawai‘i. Her research focuses on politics, ecology, and violence in eighteenth and nineteenth-century France. Her first book, Forests in Revolutionary France: Conservation, Community, and Conflict, 1669-1848 was published by Cambridge University Press in 2015.

Sanjay Subrahmanyam is Professor and Irving and Jean Stone Chair at the Department of History UCLA. He also holds a long-term visiting professorship in the Collège de France. He is the author of several books, including The Career and Legend of Vasco da Gama (1997), and Europe’s India (2008). A forthcoming volume, In the Land of Liberty: Refuge and the Promise of Asylum in Post-War France is in production with Palgrave Macmillan.


Allan Potofsky is Professor of Atlantic and French History at the Université Paris Diderot-Paris 7, specializing in early modern French, American and Parisian urban history during the eighteenth century and the French Revolution. He is the author of Constructing Paris in the Age of Revolutions (Basingstoke and NY: Palgrave, 2009, paperback, 2012) and has edited two collections of articles (for French History, in collaboration with Trevor Burnard, and The History of European Ideas). Recently published articles concern the environmental history of early modern Paris, the historical legacy of the Paris of Louis XIV, the French consular network in North America, and the investment of slave wealth in urban property during the French Revolution.

Donald Sutherland was born in Ottawa, Canada, and educated at Carleton University, the University of Sussex, and the University of London. He has taught in UK, Canada, and USA. Recently retired from University of Maryland, his most recent book is Murder in Aubagne: Lynching, Law, and Justice During the French Revolution (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

Greg Burgess completed his PhD with Peter McPhee and has since taught French and European History at the University of Tasmania and Deakin University. His interest in notions of rights and their political and cultural expressions was a theme developed in his work on refugees in France, Refuge in the Land of Liberty (2008). A follow up volume, Refugees and the Promise of Asylum in Post-War France is now in production with Palgrave Macmillan.

Kathleen Caruso is a senior lecturer in the department of history at the university of Adelaide. Her research includes the history of the French Revolution, the French Enlightenment, the Napoleonic era, and Modern Europe. She is the author of War and Religion: Catholics in the Churches of Occupied Paris, Constructing Yugoslavia: A Transnational History and, with Gareth Pritchard, Resistance and Collaboration in Hitler’s Empire. Her current research on the cult of Thérèse of Lisieux in mid-twentieth century Europe explores how the devotional lives of ordinary Catholics can provide insights into our understanding of the Church at war.

Marisa Linton is a historian of the French Revolution and the French Enlightenment. Her latest book, Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship and Authenticity in the French Revolution (OUP, 2013), examines how the Revolution’s leaders, men who started out as humanitarian idealists, came to ‘choose terror’. She is an Associate Professor in History at Kingston University, UK.

Charles Walton is a Reader in History at the University of Warwick. He is the author of Policing Public Opinion in the French Revolution (2009) and is writing an overview of the French Revolution for Penguin Books (UK). He leads an international research network on the history of socioeconomic rights.

Laura Mason, Sr. Lecturer in History and Film & Media Studies at Johns Hopkins University, is author of Singing the French Revolution and has written extensively on the French Revolution after Thermidor. She is completing a manuscript entitled The Last Revolutionaries: the Conspicuous Traitor of Gracchus Baboeuf and the Equals.