

BOOK REVIEWS

Peter McPhee, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2012, xx + 299 p., illustrations, rrp AU\$49.95, ISBN 978-0-300-11811-7.

Historians in Australia have made an outsized contribution to the study of France in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and Peter McPhee, now a professorial fellow at the University of Melbourne, is one of the most distinguished of those historians. His work includes volumes on French social history and the Revolution, and his latest work provides a personal and intellectual biography of Maximilien Robespierre and the social context of his life, from birth in Arras in 1758 to death in Paris in 1794.

Robespierre secured scholarships to France's most prestigious educational institutions in Paris and, though first destined to be a priest, he adopted the ideals of the Enlightenment. After returning home to practise as a lawyer, he won election to the Estates-General and rose up the ranks, and across the ideological waves, of the revolutionary assemblies. By 1793, he had become a powerful member of the Convention and the Committee of Public Safety and an uncompromising defender of the Revolution. Most infamously, he was associated with the Reign of Terror; the tide eventually turned and Robespierre, too, fell victim to the guillotine.

McPhee, drawing on archival sources as well as an exhaustive use of contemporary and later published materials, traces Robespierre's development, examining his psychology while avoiding psycho-historical explanations of his behaviour: the early loss of his mother, his ambition and a seeming inability to form lasting amorous relationships, despite his charisma. McPhee highlights Robespierre's ideas, charts his political alliances and analyses his downfall. Throughout the study, McPhee proves sympathetic to Robespierre and generous in his evaluations, painting a more nuanced portrait than that of a bloodthirsty dictator. He speaks of Robespierre's personal abhorrence of bloodshed, his reluctant republicanism, an attempt to combat violent de-christianisation, and refusal to push the Revolution towards proto-socialism. McPhee emphasises the challenges faced by the revolutionaries in 1793 with European powers leagued against France and with counter-revolutionaries attacking from within.

According to McPhee, Robespierre's responses revealed his 'core assumption about moral virtue as the foundation stone of healthy societies:

“virtue produces happiness, as the sun produces light...” (p. 38). Robespierre also said that ‘the mainspring of popular government [...] is at once *virtue* and *terror* [...]. Terror is nothing but prompt, severe, inflexible justice’ (p. 203). Here appears the moral quandary of ends and means, of the supposed legitimacy of executing tens of thousands of citizens to create liberty, equality and fraternity. Some readers may find McPhee too lenient concerning Robespierre’s implication in mass murder during the Terror, and on the perceived necessity of violence to safeguard the Revolution.

It would be a mistake, however, to limit Robespierre to the Terror, and McPhee’s biography usefully focuses attention on the early life of ‘the Incorruptible’ in the Artois region, the conjuncture of events that produced the Revolution and the debates that took place in France. Although not a systematic philosopher, Robespierre emerges as a thinker (influenced chiefly by the Romans and Rousseau) and a strategist, taking advantage of the possibilities offered by the Revolution to a country lawyer such as himself and unbending in putting revolutionary preaching into political practice.

Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life will now be the standard biography of the French leader, and it can also be read with great benefit for its presentation of the dynamics of French life in the late 1700s. The beautifully written text sparkles with insight into family life, social networks, education, the culture of reading, writing and publishing, the social geography of Paris and the provinces, the porous boundaries between private and public life, the role of the legal profession and of religion, the day-to-day debates in revolutionary chambers. We see how Robespierre was connected with so many of the currents of his time; for instance, his first major court case involved a scientist experimenting with a lightning conductor. The wealth of information is formidable; we learn that the Arras of Robespierre’s childhood was a city of 2,600 buildings, and that he delivered 276 speeches to the Convention. But such details never overwhelm the story of a life lived in and for the Revolution by a man who, though both lionised and vilified, played a key role in the revolutionary upheaval that he himself claimed ‘made us witness in a few days the greatest events the history of mankind can reveal’ (p. 66).

John S. McKenzie, *Images of Bodily Mechanics: The Institut Marey, Paris, 1902–1977*, Melbourne, Custom Book Centre, University of Melbourne, August 2011, 251 p., rrp AU\$ 30.00, ISBN 978-1-92177-562-8.

John McKenzie has written a meticulous account of the history of the Institut Marey, a renowned physiological research institute located at the Parc des Princes, Paris, starting from its gestation as a Station Physiologique in 1881, to its formal inception as the Institut Marey in 1902 (Chapter 3) and its eventual demolition in 1978. It is a history of the important scientific research carried out there but also, incidentally, of contemporaneous politics ranging from the level of local bureaucracy to international, including the impact on the Institut of two world wars (Chapters 6, 7 and 11).

The title of the book is somewhat misleading—images of bodily mechanics are not its main focus, at least not in a literal sense. The scope is much broader than the title suggests, encompassing much of the early years of modern physiology and especially the remarkable growth spurt in the specialised field of electrophysiology which began in the 1940s with the rapid development of electronic technology spurred by the necessities of war. ‘Images of bodily mechanics’ refers to the beginnings of the Institut Marey, when Étienne-Jules Marey, founding Director of the Institut, pioneered the use of an early form of cinematography (or ‘chronophotography’) to study physiological phenomena such as the heart-beat as well as whole bodily movement (Chapter 1). The Englishman Eadweard James Muybridge is perhaps more famous for this sort of thing—the men’s lives were remarkably in parallel, both living from 1830 to 1904. Muybridge’s visit to Marey in 1881 is mentioned only briefly (p. 5).

The book follows a strict chronology and painstakingly catalogues the contributions of the scientists (and support staff, such as the remarkable Lucien Bull) who worked at the Institut, visited it or were members of the Association of the Institut Marey. Throughout the book, McKenzie provides useful potted histories of the significant characters, including such eminent scientists as Bragg, Hill, Flourens, Pavlov, Sherrington and Starling. In particular, he details the important contributions, in the later years of the Institut, of Alfred Fessard and Denise Albe-Fessard (and their many collaborators) to modern neuroscience (Section IV). He describes how many of the world’s distinguished scientists have had a significant association with the Institut at some stage of their careers; for example, Nobel Laureate Eric Kandel, whose future research

career was to be based on the study of the sea slug *Aplysia*, was introduced to this creature when he visited the researcher Ladislav Tauc at the Institut Marey (p. 155). It is evident that the Institut was much more than an important French research establishment—through its international connections it was a pivotal centre for the world-wide exchange of ideas and promotion of physiological research.

As a former research student and colleague of the author, I have a privileged insight to this work. I have met some of the people described in the later chapters and I have an insider's knowledge of the technical and scientific material that is presented. Be warned that McKenzie, when describing the research conducted at the Institut Marey, makes no concession for the ordinary reader, who would have trouble making sense of the science, even if equipped with a good technical dictionary. Indeed, an ordinary scientist, other than a neuroscientist, might struggle with phrases such as 'antidromic stimulation of the axons of intralaminar thalamo-caudate neurones' (p. 162).

On the other hand, much of the book contains general historical information which is quite accessible and the author's personal anecdotes and recollections add a light and often humorous touch. The story of the Institut Marey, as a fairly typical organisation coping with administrative machinations, local politics, funding shortages, student riots and world events, provides a backdrop to the science or, from a non-scientist's point of view, might be seen as the main thread of the book. McKenzie has had access to archival records of the Institut and presents details of such matters as membership of committees, salaries and grants received over the years and so on. Although the Institut survived two world wars, in its protracted territorial dispute with the neighbouring Lawn Tennis Federation, the Federation was the ultimate victor and was responsible for bulldozing the buildings of the Institut to rubble. McKenzie's poignant description (pp. 205–206) of how he discovered the devastation provides a suitably tragic conclusion to Section V, Final Decade.

My impression is that the book was written without a particular audience in mind—it appears that the author has tried to include as much of the available factual detail as possible, so that it can stand as an accurate, comprehensive and reverential record of the Institut Marey, somewhat at the expense of readability. This could be seen as a weakness or strength, depending upon the interests of the reader. Although the general reader may be inclined

to skim through the difficult sections, the attention to detail makes the book an excellent resource for both scientist and historian.

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Editor's note: See, on the same topic, John S. McKenzie's 'Associations with Neurophysiology and Neurophysiologists in France' in *Explorations* 4, March 1987, pp. 16–20.