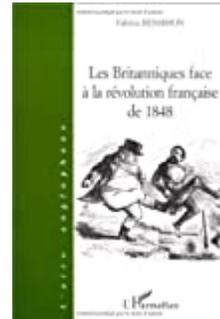




Fabrice Bensimon. *Les Britanniques face à la révolution française de 1848.* Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000. 451 pp. EUR 38.11 (paper), ISBN 978-2-7384-9787-1.



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Although the history of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britain is now well served with recent publications on the social, political, and intellectual composition of regional ethnicity and British nationality, nineteenth-century British historians in the Anglo-American world have, of late, produced much less work on these subjects. *Les Britanniques face à la révolution française* is a French contribution to this literature which attempts to place British identity issues into a wider European context.

This book, based on a careful and selective study of mid-Victorian periodicals, pamphlets, parliamentary papers, private correspondence, diaries, and memoirs, examines Anglo-French relations from February to June 1848 in several contexts: namely diplomacy, high and low politics, the intelligentsia, and the press. While the author is more familiar with the French-language historiography of modern nationalism than with recent studies of mid-Victorian politics, culture, and society, he offers a new and nuanced portrait of British responses to riot and rebellion on a national and international scale.

Bensimon begins with a re-evaluation of British official attitudes towards the July Monarchy and the events of 1848 in Paris, focusing in particular on the personalities and policies of Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston and the British Ambassador in Paris, Lord Nor-

manby. A detailed analysis of Normanby's intercourse with Alphonse de Lamartine reasserts the crucial importance of personal relationships—not excluding the social, cultural, and intellectual—in nineteenth-century international relations whilst illuminating the source of the Russell's government's conviction that the new French provisional government, of which Lamartine was the head, was staffed with moderate bourgeois republicans whose respect for private property, social order, and the rule of law outweighed the irrevolutionary and socialist convictions. This belief, in Bensimon's eyes, coupled with Palmerston's desire to uphold a pan-European neutrality towards events in France, not least because non-intervention best served Britain's commercial ascendancy in Europe, explains the British government's passivity towards French events in 1848, notwithstanding the alarming sympathy for the revolution expressed by Irish nationalists and some Chartists.

While the author expresses regret that neither group was attracted to the socialism of Louis Blanc and Alexandre Ledru-Rollin—although the Irish anti-unionists were drawn to the nationalist rhetoric of popular sovereignty—he provides an interesting survey of “radical” attempts to appropriate the slogans and symbols of all French revolutions in handbills, pamphlets, and demonstrations. 1848, for the Irish, was much more inspirational an icon of lib-

erty than it was for Chartists operating primarily within the native constitutionalist tradition. Bensimon sensibly attributes the failure of both movements in 1848 as much to internal disunity as to government repression and, in his coverage of the latter, notes that British authorities had decoupled Ireland and popular radicalism from direct association with French subversion and invasion. British views of themselves and the French had changed since the eighteenth century and Bensimon demonstrates this by a comparative analysis of press, pamphlet, pictorial, and periodical material produced in 1792 and 1848. An entire section of the book is devoted to a quantitative and qualitative survey of daily, weekly, periodical, and illustrated press coverage of 1848 and, while this work is more descriptive than analytical, it sheds considerable light on differences in perspective between the “quality” press and its more “popular” counterpart.

1848, according to Whigs and liberals in Britain, was not in the first instance confused with 1792, though conservatives begged to differ and attitudes to France across the intellectual spectrum became more negative following the journées of 23-26 June. This is not to say that British stereotypes of the “empty, noisy, fluttering,” expansionist and militaristic French had lost their resonance, but that fear was much less evident a response to revolution in the minds of Britons than it had been during the 1790s. Bensimon examines the high political and intellectual responses to 1848 amongst men and women from Lord John Russell, Robert Peel, and Benjamin Disraeli to John Stuart Mill, Alfred Tennyson, George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and the young Matthew Arnold. For those of a “liberal” disposition, who admired the intellectual and cultural savoir-faire of France, the

national character of its inhabitants predisposed them to experimentation with pure and theoretical forms of government uninformed by pragmatism and experience. The revolution was nonetheless a natural product of the July Monarchy’s abuses and inadequacies. Conservatives, not surprisingly, sided with Louis Philippe and the Bourbon family in the first instance or concluded, over the spring of 1848, that France was bound for a Burkean descent into anarchy and dictatorship. This fate was preordained by the irreligion and immorality of the French, coupled with a centralization of state power and a decline in status of great landed proprietors following the first revolution of 1789-94. Few British assessments of 1848 were positive and, as Bensimon notes, most concluded with a celebration of their country’s moral and political superiority over France.

Such exhibitions of condescension and apprehension concerning France were by no means new, for loyalist authors of the 1790s and 1800s had devised many of the historical, political, economic, and ethical arguments employed by mid-Victorians to explain and pass judgment on the events of 1848. France had long been what Bensimon calls in the 1848 context “a mirror of hopes and fears,” reflecting who the British thought they were and might be. Representatives of the “age of equipoise” were, however, much more confident in themselves and their future than their parents and grandparents had been. In the final analysis, the French Revolution of 1848 only confirmed what Britons thought they were: “liberal, loyal, dominant, self confident, proud of traditions and respectful of social distinctions, with deferential working classes and enlightened elites” (p. 399).

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