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David Bien, *Interpreting the Ancien Régime*, eds. Rafe Blaufarb, Michael S. Christofferson and Darrin McMahon. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2014. Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment 2014:09. xiv + 300 pp. Tables, bibliography and index. \$102 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978 0 7294 1144 8.

Review by David Garrioch, Monash University.

If I were asked to select one scholar of eighteenth-century France whose work I would most like to see collected and republished, I would choose David Bien. I am therefore delighted that this volume, reproducing substantial and representative selections of Bien's writing, has now appeared. Bien, who unfortunately died this past September, was one of those prudent scholars who never published work that he did not feel was fully researched and thought out. As a result he produced (by today's inflated standards) relatively little, but his book and a number of his key articles transformed understandings of the nature of the Old Regime French state, government, and society. His work was never polemical, nor did it shy away from drawing conclusions that might not please everybody, but those conclusions were always based on an extraordinary knowledge of both archival and printed sources. The short preface by Keith Baker and the longer introduction by Michael S. Christofferson remind us of Bien's fruitful approach to history, of the key focus, importance, and impact of his work, and of his friendship with François Furet—a friendship that was constructive both in advancing scholarship and in building important links between France and North America, yet that did not obscure significant differences in their interpretations.

Bien's early work was on religious politics. His article on "The background of the Calas affair" (1958), reproduced here, and even more his landmark book on the Calas Affair two years later, overturned the simplistic view that the wrongful execution of the Protestant Toulouse merchant was a straightforward consequence of endemic religious hatred.[1] Rather, he showed that the city's Huguenots were already widely tolerated by the mid-eighteenth century and that the execution was a product of renewed tensions linked to war, economic crisis, and fear of sedition. The causes of what appeared to be religious divisions were therefore contingent, and were primarily political and economic. Bien also showed that Voltaire's campaign against religious intolerance targeted a problem that was largely outdated, but for all that, it represented a clever repositioning of the *philosophes* as champions of religious freedom. These conclusions were reinforced by the second piece reproduced here, originally published in 1962, showing that the magistrates of the different parlements had begun recognising Protestant marriage, and by implication the legal existence of the Huguenots, by the 1760s, long before the so-called "Act of Toleration" of 1787. Any hesitations they had were a result of fears of internal sedition, especially in times of war, but by the end of the Seven Years' War, these fears had proven to be unfounded. Perhaps the most heretical conclusion advanced by Bien in this piece was that by then, Enlightenment ideas were influencing the magistrates, who deployed notions of natural law, natural rights, and elements of Lockean psychology in order to bypass the anti-Protestant laws of the kingdom. Although he overlooked the influence of Jansenism in the debates on Protestant marriage, his other conclusions have all been confirmed by later historical work and today seem uncontroversial. At the time, they were revolutionary.[2]

The second great *chantier* developed by Bien was on the military nobility, work represented by two pieces included in this volume. This theme was further developed in a brilliant two-part article in the *Annales* in 1974, examining the notorious Ségur law of 1781 that excluded from the Ecole militaire—and hence from the officer corps—any man who did not have four generations of nobility in the male line.[3] Bien showed that this law was directed not, as previously thought, against the sons of bourgeois, but primarily against families whose nobility was recent. That article is not included in this new volume, presumably because it has recently been republished elsewhere, but it must be read in conjunction with the two chapters here: Bien's 1979 article looking at debates within the military establishment about reform of the army and the much earlier one on the educational program offered at the Ecole militaire. Together they show that the idea of a "noble reaction," closing ranks against the bourgeoisie, was incorrect. Rather, within a relatively open nobility, the military elite was seeking to professionalize itself by excluding those of non-military background. Bien thus revealed that even a conservative institution such as the army was reforming itself in line with Enlightenment thinking about education, and that historians therefore needed to rethink the association of the Enlightenment with the revolutionary cause. Here too, his work was ahead of its time.[4]

The third area of Bien's research represented in this volume is the further development of his study of the nobility more generally, begun in his 1974 *Annales* article. Two articles from 1989 and a third, undated one on debates over the role of nobles in the local government of Toulouse, all reinforce the point that on the eve of the Revolution, the nobility was not a single caste or class, but was deeply divided. The first piece is Bien's entry on "Aristocracy," first published in François Furet and Mona Ozouf's *Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*,[5] which offers a wonderful synthesis of the role and character of the French nobility in the late eighteenth century. It debunks myths that remain remarkably persistent, showing that far from being the wealthy, landowning, idle and reactionary caste created by revolutionary mythology, French nobles were a very diverse and divided group, strongly imbued with certain ways of thinking that we associate with the Enlightenment. The second article, "Manufacturing Nobles," examines the history of the office of *secrétaire du roi*, the foremost venal office that conferred hereditary noble status on men who held it for twenty years or who died in office. In a tour de force of archival research, Bien explores the identity and motives of those who bought the office, picking his way nimbly through the swamps of Old Regime finance and law. He reveals that the highest numbers of ennoblements via these offices occurred between 1730 and 1790, enabling many new families to enter the nobility, but creating deep divisions within its ranks and intense hostility, both among nobles and commoners, towards these newcomers. The creation of this system, by a state desperate for money to fund its wars, helped to create a form of nobility that was quite different from those that developed either in England or in Eastern Europe.

This theme of French particularity is also present in the fourth area of Bien's research, on venal office more generally and on the corporatism that accompanied it. His work on the *secrétaires du roi* was followed by an equally brilliant article on stockbrokers, compulsory reading for anyone wanting to know how venality of office really worked. It is supplemented in this volume by a more modest one on the abbé Terray. Together, they show that the creation of venal offices was a brilliant device that the French state used to extract money from the vast number of corporations that were themselves also a creation of the monarchy. The various corps became, as a consequence, financial institutions lending money to the state at low rates of interest, and functioned as an alternative to the financial system that developed in Britain. In short, Bien shows that the entire system of privilege, corps, and venal offices, far from being a sign of "feudal" backwardness and fiscal stagnation, was a product of the construction of an absolute monarchy within a relatively modern market economy. One of the key consequences of this was an extraordinary democratization of investment that paved the way for the nineteenth-century financial system, but in the shorter term, it created a situation where the French monarchy was prevented, by its own success in selling offices, from undertaking the root-and-branch reform of "privilege" that many of its own leading servants wanted.

The two remaining chapters in this volume are overviews of Bien's thought. The one that concludes the volume is a wide-ranging interview with Norman Cantor, originally published in 1971. It covers the nature and long-term development of the *ancien régime* in France, the impact of Louis XIV's policies, and the differences between the forms of the state that developed across Europe. It concludes with reflections on the implications for the French Revolution of Bien's work on the nobility. Despite being a little dated, it is stimulating to read, but less so than the other synthesis piece, here placed as chapter seven. I would have preferred to see that as the final chapter because it represents Bien's more mature thinking. Published in 1994 in the collection edited by Dale Van Kley on *The French Idea of Freedom*,^[6] it too offers a comparison between the French, English, and Eastern European monarchies. It proposes three ways in which the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen was underpinned by conceptions of liberty and equality that were forged by specifically French corporate participation and office-holding. Because he is focusing so strongly on continuities, Bien does not comment on the contrast between the revolutionary conception of equal rights as individual ones and the Old Regime conception of them as collective in nature, or as existing in a hierarchy of different kinds of rights (or privileges).^[7] Nevertheless, the article offers a wonderful, thought-provoking synthesis of the nature of the Old Regime in France.

Even the oldest of the essays republished here remain stimulating, and often surprising in the precocity of their interpretations. David Bien was without doubt one of the greatest historians of eighteenth-century France, and we are indebted to the editors for bringing some of his best work together in a single volume.

NOTES

[1] *The Calas Affair* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1960).

[2] John Renwick, "Toleration and Emancipation: 'C'est la faute à Voltaire'?" in *Enlightenment and Emancipation*, ed. Susan Manning and Peter France (Lewisburg, Penn.: Bucknell University Press, 2006). On the Jansenist role, Charles H. O'Brien, "The Jansenist Campaign for Toleration of Protestants in Late Eighteenth-Century France: Sacred or Secular?" *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 46 (1985): 523-39. See also David Garrioch, *The Huguenots of Paris and the Coming of Religious Freedom, 1685-1789* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[3] David Bien, "La réaction aristocratique avant 1789: l'exemple de l'armée," *Annales : économies, sociétés, civilisations*, 29 (1974): 23-48, 505-34. Published in English in David D. Bien, with Jay M. Smith and Rafe Blaufarb, *Caste, Class and Profession in Old Regime France: the French Army and the Ségur Reform of 1781*, St Andrews Studies in French History and Culture, no. 2 (St Andrews: Centre for French History and Culture of the University of St Andrews, 2010).

[4] See Rafe Blaufarb, *The French Army, 1750-1820: Careers, Talent, Merit* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).

[5] Translated by Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1989).

[6] Dale Van Kley, ed., *The French Idea of Freedom. The Old Regime and the Declaration of Rights of 1789* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1994).

[7] See particularly the work of Olivier Christin on voting in the Old Regime: "A quoi sert de voter aux XVIe-XVIIIe siècles?" *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 140, 4 (2001): 21-30 and *Une histoire du vote avant le suffrage universel* (Paris: Seuil, 2014).

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