Books On Exhibit

Du Hausset, Mme., b. ca. 1720.
  Mémoires de Madame du Hausset, femme de chambre de Madame de Pompadour... Paris : Baudouin Frères, 1824.

Calonne, M. de (Charles Alexandre de), 1734-1802.
  Extrait de la requête adressée au roi par M. de Calonne, Ministre d'Etat.
  Londres : J. Walter, 1787.

Besenval, Pierre-Victor, baron de, 1721-1791.
  Mémoires du Baron de Besenval... Paris : Baudouin Frères, 1821.

Robespierre, Maximilien, 1758-1794.

Bertrand de Moleville, Antoine François, marquis de, 1744-1818.
  Annals of the French Revolution; or a chronological account of its principal events...hitherto unpublished. London : J. Harris, 1813.

Lally-Tolendal, Trophime-Gerard, marquis de, 1751-1830.
  Plaidoyer du Comte de Lally-Tolendal pour Louis XVI.
  Londres : Chez Elmsly..., 1792.

Prudhomme, Louis Marie, 1752-1830.

Mounier, Jean Joseph, 1758-1806.
  Recherches sur les causes qui ont empêché les Français de devenir libres. A Genève : Gattey, 1792.

Le Roy de Sainte Croix, Francois Noël, 1834-1882.

Burke, Edmund, 1729-1797.
  Reflections on the revolution in France... 11th ed.
  London : Printed for J. Dodsley, 1791.

Paine, Thomas, 1737-1809.
  Rights of man: being an answer to Mr. Burke's attack on the French revolution.

The text was written by David E. Barclay, Professor of History.
The exhibit was curated by Renata Schnelker and was made possible by the A. M. Todd Rare Book Room Fund, a growing endowment created by friends of the College.
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The events that we normally describe as the "French Revolution" were in fact simultaneously French and non-French. To be sure, the Revolution originated in uniquely French circumstances and evolved under uniquely French conditions; and its impact upon the structures and institutions of French society is difficult to exaggerate. Thus it is only natural that the French have long regarded the Revolution as an indissoluble element of their own particular historical patrimony. In the words of a recent article in *The Economist*, "Even after two centuries of dilution, the raw colours of 1789 still tint life and politics in France."

From its very outset, though, it was clear that the French Revolution had a significance that transcended the borders of that country. The great events of 1789 elicited excited commentary from Philadelphia to Moscow, and from Stockholm to Naples. Even Edmund Burke, who could hardly be described as an enthusiast of the French Revolution, described it as "the most astonishing . . . event in human history." After 1792 the French began to export revolution to the rest of Europe, but even before that date it had become obvious that many of the ideas that had sustained the Revolution in France were contagious. For better or worse, the French Revolution has profoundly shaped the modern world, and thus it is not surprising that its bicentennial has attracted so much attention in so many countries.

As David Caute has reminded us, though, "A 'revolution' is an ambiguous entity"; and in recent years historians have become more aware than ever before of the ambiguities of the French Revolution and the complexities of its legacy. Our knowledge of what happened during the Revolutionary era has increased by leaps and bounds during the last thirty years. As a result, historians have cast considerable doubt on many older assumptions about that era. The Old Regime no longer seems as corrupt, hide-bound, or impervious to change as we had once believed. To some scholars the Revolution itself presents an unedifying picture of endless political turmoil and obscene violence, culminating in a Bonapartist despotism far more sweeping in its embrace than anything that the old Bourbons could have imagined. Moreover, many historians are skeptical about the extent to which the Revolution really altered economic and social structures in France. Finally, still other scholars have returned to the classic work of Alexis de Tocqueville and shown how the Revolution was the product of long-term historical trends; as Simon Schama puts it, "Continuities seem as marked as discontinuities."

Given the Revolution's ambiguities, then, why should it be commemorated? This exhibition can help us answer that question. In recent years historians have come to regard the Revolution as, among other things, a "mental event," a transformation in the minds of human beings, a revolution in ideas, feelings, and beliefs. Above all, perhaps, it was a revolution in ideas about politics. It transformed public rhetoric and radically altered the terms of political discourse. Indeed, as Lynn Hunt has written, "French revolutionary rhetoric broke through the confines of past politics by positing the existence of a new community . . . and by insisting that it could be realized through politics (rather than through the true religion, a return to past tradition, or an adherence to some previously made social contract)." In short, the ways in which we still think about the nature and purpose of our collective lives have been irrevocably shaped by the political discourse and the political vocabulary of the Revolutionary era.

One of the major instruments of that revolution in ideas about politics was the printed word. Literacy levels in late eighteenth-century France were far higher than we might think, and the whole country was awash with printed documents through which debates about politics could be conducted. Thousands of those records have survived, and they can help us trace the development of modern ideas about the public order and the public good. The documents on display in this exhibition offer us a glimpse into that process. They range from justifications of royal reform projects during the last years of the Old Regime to nineteenth-century apotheoses of a Revolution that was already becoming mythologized. Above all, they bear witness to one of the most crucial eras in human history, and in so doing they shed light on our own collective past; for whether we know it or not, and whether we like it or not, we are all children of the French Revolution.
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Plaidoyer du Comte de Lally-Tolendal pour Louis XVI.
Londres : Chez Elmsly..., 1792.

Lally-Tolendal, Trophime-Gerard, marquis de, 1751-1830.
Les crimes des reines de France, depuis le commencement de la monarchie jusqu'à Marie-Antoinette. À Londres : L. Prudhomme, 1792.

Mounier, Jean Joseph, 1758-1806.
Recherches sur les causes qui ont empêché les Français de devenir libres. A Genève : Gattey, 1792.

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