

(p. 246). The national paradigm in Russian history is taken apart in chapter 10, which uses the Sevastopol myth to do so. This chapter is also interesting because it shows the transformations of the myth in different periods, from the empire to the present.

The volume contains five maps and a thorough index. The high production standards of the University of Toronto are also evident in this excellent book.

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RAVEL, Jeffrey S. — *The Would-Be Commoner: A Tale of Deception, Murder, and Justice in 17th-Century France*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008. Pp. 288.

This stylishly presented book is an intelligent addition to the growing opus of what might be labelled “CSI history.” Historians of the early modern period are increasingly turning to a hybrid format — serious scholarship and empirical research mixed with a more “gentle” academic writing style and narrative-driven structure — whether to attract a wider readership or to complement the ever-increasing number of “history quest” programmes and docu-dramas on television. Jeffrey Ravel tells a good story, and embeds within it scholarly research and insight about the judicial process and the role of public opinion under the *Ancien Régime*.

In brief, this book recounts one of the great *causes célèbres* of the period, in which a nobleman from Berry is presumed murdered by his adulterous wife and her clerical lover, until a man turns up in Paris claiming to be the murdered man. But there is a catch: if the man is telling the truth, he exonerates his wife, but then accepts the identity (and crimes) of a man accused of imposture as a non-nobleman and a bigamist. The case became a spectacle of society, an event gossiped about in the streets and in the salons, analysed and satirized in the press and on the stage. One of the overarching questions asked by this case concerns the natural order of society: why would a man willingly give up noble status? Ravel’s book takes its title from this question and relates it to the Molière play of a similar title. However, the author points to deeper questions alluded to in the courtroom, in society gossip, and in the theatres that are more theoretical. What is “nobility” and can it be abandoned? What is “justice,” and what is “identity,” and can these things be faked? How do any of these elements affect authority? At the heart of this debate is a sense that the ideological climate was changing and that, during the last two decades of Louis XIV’s reign, older established values of a fixed world were giving way to notions of individual freedoms, notably to make choices and to cut a path in the world based on merit, not birth.

The first four chapters of *The Would-Be Commoner* describe in detail the case of Louis de la Pivardière and Marguerite Chauvelin. Along the way, Ravel

provides useful contextual information to the reader about noble upbringing, military careers, patronage networks, the judicial system, the world of the press, marriage and divorce law, and so on. The style is readable but still quite informed, and the author avoids more populist pitfalls of trying to invent thoughts or emotions for his characters. There are a few detail flubs — Versailles was not the seat of government in the 1650s–1660s (p. 13); Vendôme is not northeast of Berry (p. 21); William of Orange was not newly crowned in England in the fall of 1688 (p. 21); Liège was not a Flemish town (p. 26); nor was Metz an archbishopric (pp. 27, 100) — but these do not detract from the general quality of the presentation of this case.

What does detract a bit from the general flow, however, is Ravel's sudden lurch into a more academic chapter on stage plays. This is, unsurprisingly, the area in which the author's academic credentials rest, but it reads here as if the contents of a journal article were suddenly sneaked in, a hundred pages into the text. The connection with theatre is, certainly, the book's link with its title, but perhaps it would have served the author better to make clearer use of this connection by positioning this material much earlier in the book. Nevertheless, the conclusions of this section do point us back into the direction of official versus popular justice (through the mouthpiece of the theatre), in pointing the finger of blame in this particular case not at either of the accused protagonists, but at the corrupt judicial system itself. Chapter 6 then focuses on this issue and provides what I would consider the "meat" of the book. This chapter gives us background on the judicial process, and on Attorney General d'Aguesseau in particular, showing us the evidence that has survived about this case in the form of his published orations. The key to this entire affair, and to the change in society in general that Ravel is illustrating, is the importance of doubt in finding truth. This forms the core of d'Aguesseau's argument in his speech, which allows the court to start again and to re-establish its own credibility in public affairs (pp. 160–161).

The Would-Be Commoner wraps up with a quick narrative of the processes of interrogation and verdict delivery. Here the text is gripping and fast-paced. You can sense the author's pleasure in describing his source materials in the *Archives nationales* and in posing questions of his own relative to the affair, tempting the reader to do so as well. He returns to the notion of a popular verdict via the theatre and to the problems of trying to change one's identity in a world that still wanted to believe in a divinely ordained social structure. The epilogue draws this out further into the aftermath of the affair in the eighteenth century, when change was becoming more of a desired reality, and heroes could emerge from any social class, not just the nobility.

I enjoyed reading this book, but I felt as if I had read it before. It follows the same formula and much of the same "plot" as another recent historical hybrid: James Farr's *A Tale of Two Murders: Passion and Power in Seventeenth-Century France* (Duke University Press, 2005). Farr's book contains more in terms of

archival spade-work and critical analysis, but either is recommendable for readers who love history and who love a good crime novel.

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SIMPSON, Antony E. — *Witnesses to the Scaffold: English Literary Figures as Observers of Public Executions: Pierce Egan, Thackeray, Dickens, Alexander Smith, G. A. Sala, Orwell*. Lambertville: The True Bill Press, 2008. Pp. 230.

Death has always had a repellent fascination for those willing to admit to the harbouring of such “disgusting” emotions. One only has to look to the large crowds that gathered at public executions in the past to understand that there was, and is, such a fascination. In *Witnesses to the Scaffold*, Antony E. Simpson examines six nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century eyewitness accounts of public executions written by well-known British writers and journalists (all of whom are listed in the title). In so doing, he attempts to reveal the individual motivations that drew them to their witnessing as well as their often unique responses to what they had witnessed.

Simpson provides detailed histories of the men and women executed, something frequently missing from histories of crime and punishment. He includes full accounts of the facts of the case leading up to the trial and of the trial itself. For instance, in the case of François Benjamin Courvoisier, a Swiss servant who was executed for killing his master Lord William Russell, Simpson includes a thorough analysis of the controversy surrounding Charles Phillips’s defence of the accused after he had confessed his guilt.

The circumstances that influenced and the context surrounding the writing of the individual narratives are also given attention. For example, we learn that there is some question attached to the provenance of Pierce Egan’s narrative of the execution of John Thurtell (1824). We also learn that Egan was acquainted with Thurtell and may have represented him in a favourable light because Thurtell rewarded Egan with an exclusive interview from prison and because they shared a passion for boxing.

In addition to all the details he provides on the individual cases, Simpson also relates the executions to broader British societal concerns. In the introduction to Alexander Smith’s essay on the execution of two Irish Catholic navvies who murdered an English foreman in Glasgow in 1841, Simpson explicates the religious tensions and ethnic conflict prevalent in certain industries, primarily in Scotland, but also to a lesser extent in England. The cases thus become useful tools for exploring wider issues in British society.

Simpson’s chief goal, however, seems to be to uncover the motivations and reactions of the authors. He carefully details why the narratives were written, notes