

## Compte rendu

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## COMPTES RENDUS BIBLIOGRAPHIQUES

PINCHEMEL, P., ROBIC, M.-C. et TISSIER, J.-L. (1984) *Deux siècles de géographie française*. Paris, ministère de l'Éducation nationale, Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques, 380 p.

This is not, as one might reasonably expect from its title, a history of French geography in the XIX<sup>th</sup> and XX<sup>th</sup> centuries, nor is it in anyway an attempt to synthesize the various threads and themes that may be discerned in French geographical writings over the last 200 years. Instead it is no less than its subtitle claims: a "choix de textes" (over 60), drawn from some 50-odd authors, published between approximately 1835 and 1983. The selections of works by non-living authors are followed by brief but useful commentaries, containing biographical material and a discussion locating the extract in question within the context of the author's overall contribution and those of his contemporaries.

The chosen texts are grouped unequally into 4 periods and ordered more or less chronologically within each: before 1890 (approximately 75 p. and 9 texts); 1890-1926 (*À l'ombre de Vidal*, 60 p. and 10 extracts); 1927-1960 (*Une géographie établie*, 130 p. and 23 extracts); and 1960-1983 (*Une géographie à plusieurs voies*, 90 p. and 17 extracts). A final selection of 3 extracts (*Lettres et lieux*) reminds us that "les géographes n'ont jamais eu le monopole de la géographie" (p. 369) and there is much to reflect upon in the creative insights of essayists, novelists and poets.

It has become commonplace to suggest that edited collections of this nature inform readers more about the *editor's* views of the world than those of the authors whose work comprise such a volume. In the present case such criticism is misplaced. While different readers might easily quibble over the inclusion or omission of particular authors or over the choice of particular examples of their work, this kind of criticism would, I believe, miss the point of the enterprise. Such a collection should be approached much as one meanders at pleasure through a permanent, thematically-organized art exhibition, pausing here and there over striking examples of particular topics and periods, reflecting, above all, over the circumstances of time, place and biography implicit in the production of individual pieces. In an excellent preface to the volume, Pierre George reminds us of this requirement: "chaque page, chaque œuvre doit être relue en considération du moment où elle a été écrite et des événements qui ont entouré sa conception". Without constant attention to this principle it would be easy to dismiss a number of the selections not simply as antiquated but as intellectually superficial and even vacuous.

The inclusion of an extract of Victor Guérin's thesis on Rhodes (1856) provides a good example of this problem. In her commentary on Guérin and his work, Geneviève Pinchemel suggests we should view it as the work of a *geographer*, "qui localise, analyse les facteurs du milieu physique, y montre l'insertion des hommes et dresse le tableau d'une 'physionomie' véritable des lieux". This is certainly an appropriate suggestion, though the extract of this thesis used to illustrate the point being made amounts to little more than elementary and almost naive description. Georges Radet, for example, who wrote the detailed history of l'École française d'Athènes of which Guérin was a member when he visited Rhodes, appraised Guérin's work in quite different terms:

"Pas plus à Rhodes qu'ailleurs, Victor Guérin n'a tracé un durable sillon. Infatigable en descriptions faciles, il est le Jacques Delille du tourisme... il négligea toute observation sérieuse. Son excursion... fut une tournée à vol d'oiseau. Du livre qu'elle lui inspira (*viz.* Guérin's *doctorat*), il n'y a guère à garder que les indications de statistiques".

Radet's history was published in 1901, and written from the point of view of classical archeologist and epigrapher (hence we may surmise his sense of what constituted "observation

sérieuse"): he was equally scornful of Guérin's other contributions as a member of the School and treated his subsequent published work on Syria, Palestine and Tunisia with similar disdain (G. Radet (1901) *L'histoire et l'œuvre de l'École française d'Athènes*, p. 345-348 and 374-377). Like beauty, perhaps, geography is in the eye of the beholder!

Radet, incidently, dates Guérin's visit to Rhodes as June-July 1854: barely the "plusieurs mois" claimed for the visit by G. Pinchemel (p. 43). By and large, the added commentaries on the various selections are useful and well-written: Georges Nicolas on Camille Vallaux (p. 130-131) is excellent and Numa Broc on Eugène Cortambert (p. 39) and on Bertrand Auerbach (p. 97-99) is as ever solid and dependable. Here and there, however, the odd lack of attention to detail reveals itself: for example, Jean Brunhes' appointment to the chair founded by A. Kahnat the Collège de France was in 1912 (not 1922, p. 105); it is wrong to say that H. Taine was in the same ENS promotion as Émile Levasseur (Taine entered the School a year earlier in 1848, p. 69) and his nomination to a chair at the Collège de France was actually in 1871, not 1872 (albeit December 18<sup>th</sup>, 1971); Guérin's nomination to the École française d'Athènes was on May 6<sup>th</sup>, 1852, not 1853 (p. 43); and, to remain with Levasseur and Guérin only as examples, if it is indeed important to include details on their early teaching appointments, it could be added that Levasseur spent two years at the Lycée d'Alençon (1852-1854) before teaching in Besançon (p. 69), and that Guérin was "maître-surveillant" at the ENS (1851-1852) before going to Athens (p. 43).

These kinds of minor causes for irritation should in no way detract from the experience of rereading the various texts, and the decision to place these added commentaries *after* the selection rather than before it certainly avoids the usual problem of imposing unwanted filters on the reader's reception of the work. Having read through these selections and derived considerable pleasure in doing so, the final words of evaluation in Pierre George's preface present an admirable summary of the experience:

"L'enseignement majeur d'un retour à des lectures oubliées ou négligées est à la fois que la géographie est toujours la géographie, mais qu'elle est aussi un miroir historique d'un souci permanent, celui de comprendre comment, sinon pourquoi, les hommes sont assujettis aux contraintes de leur espace tout en en modifiant les formes par une action consciente et inconsciente à la fois créatrice et destructrice. Le mythe d'Antée est sous-jacent à toute géographie" (p. 8).

Of what is Pierre George reminding us in this classical allusion? Antaeus was the mighty giant and wrestler of Libya, born of Poseidon and Ge. Travellers to his country were forced to fight him: all were vanquished and subsequently slain, their skulls used to build a house to Poseidon. The source of his prodigious strength was the very ground on which he stood: as long as he remained in contact with his mother the Earth he was invincible. Combatants who actually managed to throw him found him returning to the fight with renewed power from his contact with the maternal source of his strength. It was Heracles who finally disposed of Antaeus, en route to his twelfth labour of retrieving the golden apples of Hesperides, by lifting him bodily in the air and strangling him easily as his strength flowed from his, cut off from its source. There is then a double sense in which it may be argued that the Antaeus myth underpins all of geography: if we depart from the land as the source of the substantive subject matter of our discipline, we are lost; if we depart from concrete realities in theory-building and are seduced instead by metaphysical speculation, we are equally doomed. In more than one sense, therefore, we must remain *grounded*, anchored empirically and theoretically to the world around us either in the here and now, or the there and then. Arguably, this may be the single preeminent concern that has characterized French geography of the last 200 years and which serves to distinguish that unique tradition from the development and practice of geography elsewhere. This book is a just testament to the nobility of that concern and a timely reminder of the vitality of that tradition.

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