France, 1848-1945
by Theodore Zeldin

Vol. I: Ambition, Love and Politics
(Oxford University Press; 823 pp.; $19.50)
Vol. II: Intellect, Taste and Anxiety
(Oxford University Press; 1,202 pp.; $29.95)

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The publication of the second volume now makes it safe to say that this work, by the measures of breadth, imagination, and brilliance, is a classic. At least for the next several decades no one will do the history of modern France without reference to this work. And most serious historians in the English world will judge all new national histories by the measure of Zeldin's two volumes.

Outside the pale of the official France that politicians and intellectuals have taught us to know there are many French nations. Zeldin, mentor and practitioner of the new serial history, dedicates his work to introducing us to some of these nations he considers the most important and significant.

In Volume I we meet them at length and in intimacy in eminently readable chapters composed of fascinating mosaics of anecdote, data, and comparison. Among those we meet are the rich, the workers, the peasants (an especially good chapter), the industrialists, the bankers, the bureaucrats, and the notaries. We understand them in their powers and weaknesses, their functions and ambitions, and even in their secret lives.

Zeldin does not mind undoing a myth or two along the way. Of France's "twenty million changing French peasants, who for a hundred years have provided France with stability and the power of a democratic republic," he suggests that on all counts—by nature of wealth, land, voting, religious practice, customs, and so on—they form many different groups which, owing to turmoil, rivalry, and sheer confusion, are being pushed and are scrambling their way into the modern world. Regarding Napoleon III's successful social policy, Zeldin prefers explanations of successful manipulation of differing interests to theories about the totalitarian nature of mass society. Napoleon's policy succeeded because it meant "careers open to talent, fusion of classes, the ending of privileges except those based on merit, prosperity for all but not at the expense of rich, employment and social benefits for the working class, cheap credit and less taxation for the mortgaged peasantry, property ultimately for all men, great public works and improved communications which would be self financing because they would increase the national wealth, peace, but also glory."

Zeldin also probes the private quarters of French life. He tells us just how unstable French marriages were: "A large proportion of France's children did not have a full family life. Around 1900 for every fifteen families which had both father and mother alive, there were six families incomplete (four of them having a father dead and two a mother dead). Only 54 percent of marriages lasted longer than 15 years...45 percent of the children were orphans in their teens....Of the children born in the year 1875, 93,000 were abandoned by their parents. One out of every fourteen was illegitimate."

Zeldin claims that adultery attained a level of near inevitability in a society in which the majority of men "made love to their wives only when they wanted a child." Encouraged by the Church's campaign against masturbation (some church schools were said to periodically bleed pupils who revealed excessive sexuality), many of France's boys made precocious and frequent pilgrimages to the abounding brothels of Paris. ("The numbers of these official brothels in Paris was 180 in 1810, 200 in 1840, but they gradually fell to 145 in 1870, 125 in 1881 and 59 in 1892. The reason was the growth of clandestine brothels, which the police estimated contained some 15,000 prostitutes in 1888.)

In the second volume we get a closer view of the various French nations which, for the most part, treasured their private lives above public life. Public life was a topic more fit for idle discussion than serious concern. Here we meet people eating and drinking, thinking about themselves and others, trying to look beautiful, have a good time and not fall prey to envy; people lying, feeling guilty, getting old, not wanting to die, dying anyhow. Suggestive of the contents of the volume are chapter titles such as "Education and Hope," "Privilege and Culture," "Good and Bad Taste," "Conformity and Superstition," "Happiness and Humor," "Worry, Boredom and Hysteria," "Gerontocracy," and "Hypocrisy."

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The theme that joins these inquiries is how much French people and their ways eluded the best efforts of schools, bureaucrats, and official ideologies to make them into one nation. If Zeldin is correct, De Tocqueville's worry about one mass society was, at least in the case of France, unnecessary.

As France's great literature is only a tiny portion of what is written, and what is written is only a smaller portion of what is said and done, so the official France of high culture is only the surface of many nations. In 1951 only
The frivolity of the masses did not always hide the deeper fact: "Frenchmen no longer needed to fear death by starvation. But men became more mobile, both physically and socially; the many new opportunities before them complicated the choices they had to make and created tensions as severe as have been experienced before or since." This meant experiencing the anxiety that comes with the desire for a better life, the guilt of having and trying to satisfy new wants, the boredom that invariably comes with first experiences of idle Sundays. In some cases it even meant trying to square one's pleasure and religion, superstitions and science. (Zeldin delightfully calls our attention to the existence of voyantes diplômées and mediums agréé).

In short, there was deep confusion. It is little wonder "that nostalgia was more widespread than optimism" in the presence of so much uncertainty. And there cannot be much surprise in the fact that different parts of these nations zigzagged, turned about, and were twisted in their search for a sustaining sense of order. Two quotations can be used to summarize Zeldin's view of the uncertain position of the individual and the superficiality of the national ideal:

"The individual had not learnt to cope with himself, let alone with the political and economic institutions surrounding him....The problems of human relations, of dealing with family, friends and strangers, were baffling because human knowledge was still in a very primitive stage. Frenchmen were not short of ideas, nor banners behind which they could march, but they were short of mirrors in which they could see themselves."

And "The nationalism of France was based on a euphoria which gave people the illusion that they had found a purpose....It undoubtedly made possible the achievement of noble and plausible goals, but it also diverted a great deal of energy into sterile pursuits. French nationalism in this period, though it was progressive and liberal, was still the child of the monarchs of the ancient régime; it was obsessed by power and vanity. Its ambitions were constantly disrupted by emotion, because it had only a limited understanding of the individual imagination: it placed its faith in laws and institutions. Individuals learnt to shrug these off, and this, as much as the efforts of the politician, explains why France was, to a certain extent, or sometimes, a free country."

Much the same, one suspects, might be said of the United States. Zeldin's study of France illuminates a more general truth: that human groups are many, and, like the human heart, do not proceed at the same tempo, the appearance of structural unity notwithstanding.