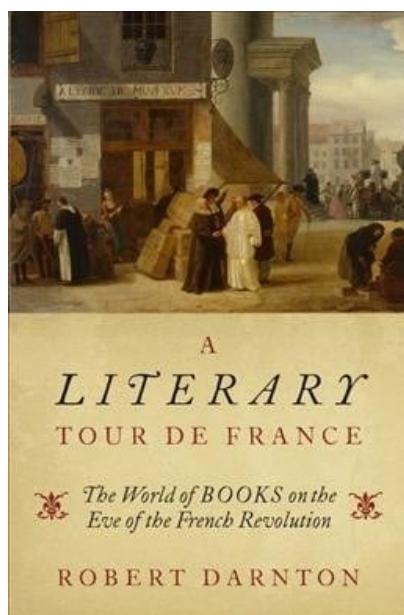


A Deluge of Books

A Review of A Literary Tour De France: The World of Books on the Eve of the French Revolution

by Daniel Mallock (March 2018)



A Literary Tour De France: The World of Books on the Eve of the French Revolution
by Robert Darnton

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The diffusion of revolutionary ideas into and across France prior to 1789 is a subject often discussed and studied but rarely has the matter of how and by whom the books themselves made their way into and throughout the country been covered. Robert Darnton's fascinating "A Literary Tour de France" goes a long way to fill this hole in the historical literature of, well, historical literature.

It has long been known that works by Voltaire, the Encyclopedists, Condorcet, Rousseau, and other enlightenment writers were influential in setting the cultural and political stage for the revolution and the fall of the French monarchy. Other types of literature also played an important part in subverting the legitimacy of the regime and building a generally understood and widespread belief that alternatives to the absolutism of monarchy were available, attractive, and within reach. These generally unknown works are discussed in this book. Somebody had to publish these books, and get them into France by evading government bans and confiscations; others transported, and sold the books. This is the world that Robert Darnton inhabited for decades and describes in detail in this fascinating book. The book is as much about books as it is about the people publishing, smuggling, and selling them.

It is certainly not a standard approach to begin reading a book at the end. This book is an exception. The motives and drivers of the author, an accomplished scholar and academic, are important to understanding and appreciating the sometimes overwhelming depth of details included in the book. In a sense, the author's travels within and without the archives of Neuchâtel are as instructive to what is happening within the book as are the details so thoroughly documented. Only by reading the author's acknowledgements that appear at the end of the book first, do the fine details and the many years spent in accumulating, understanding, translating, organizing and writing about them come into focus.

A professor of history at Harvard and Princeton and emeritus Director of the

University Library at Harvard, Mr. Darnton is especially well-qualified to explore this subject. Who better to discuss the history of the importation of books into pre-revolutionary France than a historian of French history, author, and library director? This is not a book about the penetration of ideas into a society but rather the paper on which the words were printed, sheets of unbound books packed in bundles of 50 pounds or more for transport across the western mountains of Switzerland and on into France. Why these sheets were produced and by whom, and how they were transported, bought and sold is just as important as the ideas written on them. Rather than making an historical argument about books and ideas, Darnton offers a "slice of life."

In a recent conversation with this reviewer, the author asserted that "part of the job of historians is to reconstruct worlds." He does that very thing in this book—builds out and populates the milieu of publishing, book selling, shipping, smuggling, and evasion. The travels and activities of one sales representative of a Swiss publisher/wholesaler are highlighted to illustrate for the reader what the world of books looked like in provincial France in the two decades prior to the revolution.

Immersing himself in the archives of a Swiss publisher/wholesaler called the Société Typographique de Neuchâtel (STN) since 1965 the author worked with what he described as a "treasure trove" of records. The core of the book follows the five month's horseback travels of Monsieur Favarger, a young STN sales rep on his rounds across some of the major provincial cities of France from mid to late 1778. Though Favarger's route did not include Paris we do get his impressions of those people involved in the book trade in cities such as Besançon, Dole, Dijon, Lyon, Nimes, Marseille, Poitiers, and Orleans (and others), whom he met on his wide circular path back to home base at Neuchâtel before the arrival of winter storms in the mountains.

The book sellers' lives in France just before the revolution were not easy. In conversation, the author described his purpose as explaining for the reader "how the characters played their parts and how the world of books operated as a

system of communication." In a letter to STN managers, one book seller from Tours described the French book trade thus: "You surely know the proverb of our city . . . 99 rich rotisserie chefs and one book seller dying of hunger."

Loaded with extraordinary detail of books, book sellers and those with whom they worked, it is also much more for those who read between the lines. It is a window into the world of the historian, focusing sharply but through a one-way mirror so-to-speak on the lonely world of the historian as he wades through tens of thousands of pages of ledgers, dossiers, and correspondence. When the lights of the archives are switched off and the staff and researchers make their way home, a world of meaningful friendships, human kindness, beautiful scenery, small villages, alpine vistas, and superb wines and meals comes into view. All of this life of the historian outside the archives is described in the acknowledgements section at the end of the book which in itself could be the foundation of a follow up book.

The historian's work is certainly not glamorous but it can be fulfilling. When one reads this book and is struck by the sometimes-overwhelming details, one only needs to review the acknowledgements to gather a swift understanding of what is really happening; it is a historian's diary of the pleasures of the writing life.

Some readers may find the depth of detail more a distraction than added color. In fact, there is so much detail that "A Literary Tour de France" skirts dangerously close to micro-history. When comprehensiveness and thoroughness are essential parts of the author's mission an over-abundance of information can become a troubling issue. This book is not an introductory approach but a thorough study backed up with even further data available on a website as a kind of research companion. For readers whose interest is books, book sellers, the trade in books, and how a Swiss firm skirted pre-revolutionary French bans and inspectors to get their wares into the French market Darnton's book will be seen as an important resource and a pleasure to read.

Mr. Darnton “wandered around in a world that isn’t known” for many years in the archives of the STN in Neuchâtel. Awash in superb details that illuminate a previously unexplored aspect of literary life in pre-revolutionary France, the author delivers as promised. Open the pages of “A Literary Tour de France” and the lights of the Neuchâtel archives switch on.

This is an unusual volume and a treat for all readers who love books, for people who love history and, most of all, for people interested in humanity. At its core, history is the study of people; to be accomplished at the historian’s work is to have a great interest in and affection for humanity. It is perfectly correct that a book about books should be a pleasure for the writer to write. For the reader who loves books, France, and history, pour a Syrah and switch the light on beside your favorite reading chair.

Daniel Mallock is a historian of the Founding generation and of the Civil War and is the author of