

EDITED BY
Peter McPhee

 WILEY-BLACKWELL

Contents

[Notes on Contributors](#)

[Abbreviation](#)

[Introduction](#)

[PART I: The Origins and Nature of the Crisis of 1789](#)

[CHAPTER ONE: Rethinking the Origins of the French Revolution](#)

[Can We Explain the Origins?](#)

[The Orthodox View](#)

[A Revolutionary Bourgeoisie?](#)

[Eighteenth-Century Capitalism in Question](#)

[The Nature of the Nobility](#)

[The Enlightenment and the Revolution](#)

[Rethinking the Models of Revolution](#)

[Redefining the State and Power](#)

[Crisis and Revolution](#)

[CHAPTER TWO: The Social and Economic Crisis in France at the End of the Ancien Régime](#)

[Back to Basics: An Unequal and Fragmented Society](#)

Growth and Prosperity in the Eighteenth Century:
Evidence and Ambiguity
Crystallization of Crises between 1785 and 1789

CHAPTER THREE: The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution

CHAPTER FOUR: France and the Atlantic World

I
II
III

PART II: Reshaping France, 1789–91

CHAPTER FIVE: The Principles of 1789

CHAPTER SIX: Reimagining Space and Power

Administrative Space
The New Division of the Territory
Winners and Losers
Dispensing Justice
Religion and Public Space
Revolutionary Vandalism and Symbolic Space
Building the Revolution
Conclusion: Reordering Space and Time

CHAPTER SEVEN: “The Case against the King,” 1789–93

PART III: Church, State, and War

CHAPTER EIGHT: The Ancien Régime, Catholic Europe, and the Revolution’s Religious Schism

A Brief Overview¹

The Making of the Civil Constitution

The Making of the Papal Condemnation

Conclusion

CHAPTER NINE: The Origins and Outcomes of Religious Schism, 1790–99

Introduction

Precursors to Crisis: The Late Ancien Régime and Early Revolution, 1764–90

The Ecclesiastical Oath and Birth of a Schism, 1790–92

Church Destruction and Resilience, 1793–99

Conclusion

CHAPTER TEN: A Tale of Two Narratives: The French Revolution in International Context, 1787–93

The Two Nightmare Narratives

The Nootka Sound Crisis

The Unimaginable Alliance and the Resurgence of Austria

The Road to War²⁹

Final Assessment

PART IV: Contesting the Limits of Revolution

CHAPTER ELEVEN: Whose Revolution?

Rights and Exclusions

Rustics, Peasants, and Commoners

Assemblies of Citizens

The Sharing of Weaponry

Minorities and Universalism

The Universalizing of Circulation and

Revolutionary Currency

Legislative Constraints

Conclusion

CHAPTER TWELVE: Gender, Sexuality, and Political Culture

The Sexualist Paradigm

The Political Exclusion of Women

A Sexist Democracy

The Patriarchal Paradigm

Familialism or Women in the Political System

The Patriarchy and the Question of Spheres

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: The Peasantry, Feudalism, and the Environment, 1789–93

Introduction

The Peasantry and their Grievances in 1789

Insurrection and the Abolition of Feudalism

Access to Land: Actions and Results

The Impact on the Environment

Conclusion

PART V: Revolutionary and Counter- Revolutionary Violence

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: Urban Crowds, Riot, Utopia, and Massacres, 1789–92

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: The Vendée, Chouannerie, and the State, 1791–99

Identical Beginnings

The March 1793 Rupture

The Drift of the Civil War

The *Chouan* Guerrilla

Between Glory and Disdain

PART VI: Political Choice and Practice

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: Friends, Enemies, and the Role of the Individual

Introduction

The Terrain of Revolutionary Politics: Ideological, Tactical, Personal

Virtue or Friendship?

Barnave, Brissot, Desmoulins, and the Jacobins of the Constituent Assembly

Brissot's Letter to Barnave

Desmoulins' Brissot Unmasked

Barnave's Trial

Desmoulins' Friends

Conclusion

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: Choosing Revolution and Counter-Revolution

Introduction

Choosing Revolution

Choosing Counter-Revolution

Conclusion

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: The Course of the Terror, 1793-94

When Does "the Terror" Begin?

The Vendée, Conscription, and Extraordinary Measures

Girondins, Federalism, and the Template of Betrayal and Subversion

Terror Laws, Hunger, Revolutionary Armies, and
“Anarchy”
War Effort, Show Trials, Revolutionary
Government
Factions, Fear, and Fabrications
Centralization, Victories, Purifications
Shining Future and Closing Circle
Endgames

PART VII: Searching for Stability., 1794–99

CHAPTER NINETEEN: The Thermidorian
Reaction

CHAPTER TWENTY: The Political Culture of
the Directory

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: The New Security
State

Concepts
Modern Bureaucracy
Choosing War
Social Democracy
Military Repression
Political Measures
The Security State at Work

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: The White Terror: Factions, Reactions, and the Politics of Vengeance

PART VIII: The Revolution in International Perspective

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: The International Repercussions of the French Revolution

Historiography

The Ideological and Cultural Repercussions

The Impact of the French Revolutionary Wars

The Conservative Backlash

Conclusion

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: Slavery and the Colonies

Colonial Society on the Eve of Revolution

The Success of the Colonial Lobby over the
Société des Amis des Noirs

The Calling into Question of White Supremacy

The Spreading of Revolts in Saint-Domingue

The Victory of the Free Coloreds

The Long March Towards the Abolition of Slavery

The Difficult Application of Abolition

Bonaparte's Colonial Reaction

Conclusion

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: The Revolutionary Mediterranean

The Problem of the Mediterranean in the Eighteenth Century

The Mediterranean and Revolutionary Universalism

The Many-Headed Hydra in the Mediterranean Conflict and Conjuncture in the Mediterranean

Conclusion: The Mediterranean Revolution

PART IX: Change and Continuity in France

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX: A Revolution in Political Culture

Public Opinion and Popular Opinion

Elections, Fulcrum of the New Political Culture

Newspapers and Clubs

The “Sans-Culottes”

Failed Constitutions and Political Parties

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN: The Economy, Society, and the Environment

The Urban Economy

Rural Change and Continuity

Capitalism in the Countryside

The Revolution and Social Change

Conclusion

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT: The French
Revolution and the Family

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE: The Revolution in
History, Commemoration, and Memory

A Changing Historiography
From Celebrations to Commemorations
Memories and Histories

Index

WILEY-BLACKWELL COMPANIONS TO HISTORY

This series provides sophisticated and authoritative overviews of the scholarship that has shaped our current understanding of the past. Defined by theme, period, and/or region, each volume comprises between twenty-five and forty concise essays written by individual scholars within their area of specialization. The aim of each contribution is to synthesize the current state of scholarship from a variety of historical perspectives and to provide a statement on where the field is heading. The essays are written in a clear, provocative, and lively manner, designed for an international audience of scholars, students, and general readers.

WILEY-BLACKWELL COMPANIONS TO EUROPEAN HISTORY

A Companion to Europe 1900–1945

Edited by Gordon Martel

A Companion to Eighteenth-Century Europe

Edited by Peter H. Wilson

A Companion to Nineteenth-Century Europe

Edited by Stefan Berger

A Companion to the Worlds of the Renaissance

Edited by Guido Ruggiero

A Companion to the Reformation World

Edited by R. Po-chia Hsia

A Companion to Europe Since 1945

Edited by Klaus Larres

A Companion to the Medieval World

Edited by Carol Lansing and Edward D. English

A Companion to the French Revolution

Edited by Peter McPhee

WILEY-BLACKWELL COMPANIONS TO AMERICAN HISTORY

A Companion to the American Revolution

Edited by Jack P. Greene and J. R. Pole

A Companion to 19th-Century America

Edited by William L. Barney

A Companion to the American South

Edited by John B. Boles

A Companion to American Indian History

Edited by Philip J. Deloria and Neal Salisbury

A Companion to American Women's History

Edited by Nancy A. Hewitt

A Companion to Post-1945 America

Edited by Jean-Christophe Agnew and Roy Rosenzweig

A Companion to the Vietnam War

Edited by Marilyn B. Young and Robert Buzzanco

A Companion to Colonial America

Edited by Daniel Vickers

A Companion to American Foreign Relations

Edited by Robert D. Schulzinger

A Companion to 20th-Century America

Edited by Stephen J. Whitfield

A Companion to the American West

Edited by William Deverell

A Companion to the Civil War and Reconstruction

Edited by Lacy K. Ford

A Companion to American Technology

Edited by Carroll Pursell

A Companion to African-American History

Edited by Alton Hornsby, Jr

A Companion to American Immigration

Edited by Reed Ueda

A Companion to American Cultural History

Edited by Karen Halttunen

A Companion to California History

Edited by William Deverell and David Igler

A Companion to American Military History

Edited by James Bradford

A Companion to Los Angeles

Edited by William Deverell and Greg Hise

A Companion to American Environmental History

Edited by Douglas Cazaux Sackman

A Companion to Benjamin Franklin

Edited by David Waldstreicher

WILEY-BLACKWELL COMPANIONS TO WORLD HISTORY

A Companion to Western Historical Thought

Edited by Lloyd Kramer and Sarah Maza

A Companion to Gender History

Edited by Teresa A. Meade and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks

A Companion to the History of the Middle East

Edited by Youssef M. Choueiri

A Companion to Japanese History

Edited by William M. Tsutsui

A Companion to International History 1900–2001

Edited by Gordon Martel

A Companion to Latin American History

Edited by Thomas Holloway

A Companion to Russian History

Edited by Abbott Gleason

A Companion to World War I

Edited by John Horne

A Companion to Mexican History and Culture

Edited by William H. Beezley

A Companion to World History

Edited by Douglas Northrop

A Companion to Global Environmental History

Edited by J. R. McNeill and Erin Stewart Mauldin

A Companion to World War II

Edited by Thomas W. Zeiler, with Daniel M. DuBois

For further information on these and other titles in the
series please visit our website at

www.wiley.com

A COMPANION TO THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

Edited by

Peter McPhee

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**
A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

This edition first published 2013

© 2013 Blackwell Publishing Ltd

Blackwell Publishing was acquired by John Wiley & Sons in February 2007. Blackwell's publishing program has been merged with Wiley's global Scientific, Technical, and Medical business to form Wiley-Blackwell.

Registered Office

John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate,
Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

Editorial Offices

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK
The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19
8SQ, UK

For details of our global editorial offices, for customer services, and for information about how to apply for permission to reuse the copyright material in this book please see our website at www.wiley.com/wiley-blackwell.

The right of Peter McPhee to be identified as the author of the editorial material in this work has been asserted in accordance with the UK Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, except as permitted by the UK Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Wiley also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic books.

Designations used by companies to distinguish their products are often claimed as trademarks. All brand names

and product names used in this book are trade names, service marks, trademarks or registered trademarks of their respective owners. The publisher is not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book. This publication is designed to provide accurate and authoritative information in regard to the subject matter covered. It is sold on the understanding that the publisher is not engaged in rendering professional services. If professional advice or other expert assistance is required, the services of a competent professional should be sought.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A companion to the French Revolution / edited by Peter McPhee.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4443-3564-4 (cloth)

1. France--History--Revolution, 1789--1799--Historiography. 2.

France--History--Revolution,
1789--1799. I. McPhee, Peter, 1948--

DC147.8.C75 2013

944.04--dc23

2012022352

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Cover image: Paul Delaroche, *The Conquerors of the Bastille before the Hotel de Ville in 1789*, 1839 (oil on canvas).

Musée de la Ville de Paris, Musée du Petit-Palais, France/The Bridgeman Art Library

Cover design by Richard Boxall Design Associates

For Lynn Hunt

*whose innovative research and generous scholarship
pervade this collection*

Notes on Contributors

Serge Aberdam is a researcher with the National Institute for Agronomic Research (INRA), Department of Social Sciences. He completed his doctoral thesis in 2001 under Michel Vovelle on “The Widening of the Right to Vote 1792–95,” for which the statistical material is available online through the Société des Études Robespierriistes. He has published on many aspects of popular participation in the French Revolution.

David Andress is Professor of Modern History at the University of Portsmouth, UK. His specialized research has focused on the history of Paris in the period 1789–91, and more recently on the place of melodramatic sentimentality in revolutionary language and perceptions. He has also written extensively on the wider history of the period, most notably *The Terror: Civil War in the French Revolution* (2004), and *1789: The Threshold of the Modern Age* (2008).

Howard G. Brown (D.Phil., Oxford) is Professor of History at Binghamton University (State University of New York). He has published several books, most notably *Ending the French Revolution: Violence, Justice, and Repression from the Terror to Napoleon* (2006), which received the Leo Gershoy Award from the American Historical Association.

Peter Campbell is Professor of Modern History in the Institute of Cultural Studies (IEC) at the University of Versailles Saint-Quentin. He has published widely on Louis XIV, the early modern state, the court, the Parlement of Paris, the political culture of the *ancien régime*, patriotic ideology and politics, and the origins of the Revolution.

Stephen Clay is a “Maître de Conférences” at Sciences Po, Paris. His research focuses on political conflict and violence during the French Revolution and Napoleonic periods, chiefly in the Midi, about which he has published numerous articles. He is the author of a forthcoming book on this subject, and is also the general editor of an international dictionary of the French Revolution to be published by Armand Colin.

Ian Coller is Lecturer in European History at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia. He is the author of *Arab France: Islam and the Making of Modern Europe, 1798-1831* (2011) and is currently working on a history of extraterritorial European spaces in the eighteenth-century Muslim world.

Suzanne Desan is Vilas Distinguished Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her current research focuses on foreigners and international influences in revolutionary France. She is author of *Reclaiming the Sacred: Lay Religion and Popular Politics in Revolutionary France* (1990) and *The Family on Trial in Revolutionary France* (2004).

Pascal Dupuy is “Maître de Conférences” in Modern History at the University of Rouen. He teaches the history of the French Revolution and its memory using imagery, both fixed and moving, which he has made the object of his major studies. He has published several books, including *Caricatures anglaises: Face à la Révolution et l’Empire (1789-1815)* (2008); and *La Révolution française* (with Claude Mazauric, 2005).

Michael P. Fitzsimmons is Professor of History at Auburn University Montgomery. He is the author of *The Parisian Order of Barristers and the French Revolution* (1987), *The Remaking of France* (1994), *The Night the Old Regime*

Ended (2003), and *From Artisan to Worker* (2010), as well as articles in various journals.

Alan Forrest is Professor of Modern History at the University of York. He has published widely on the history of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Empire, and on the history of modern warfare. Recent books include *The Legacy of the French Revolutionary Wars: The Nation-in-Arms in French Republican Memory* (2009) and *Napoleon* (2011).

Jean-Pierre Jessenne is Emeritus Professor at the University of Lille 3. He is a member of the Conseil d'Administration of the Société des Études Robespierristes. Among his recent publications are *Les Campagnes françaises entre mythe et histoire (XVIIIe-XXIe s.)* (2006); *Vers un ordre bourgeois? Révolution française et changement social* (edited, 2007); and "Une Révolution sans ou contre les paysans?", in Michel Biard (ed.), *La Révolution française, une histoire toujours vivante* (2009).

Peter M. Jones has written extensively on the French Revolution. He is Professor of French History in the University of Birmingham, UK. Among his books are *The French Revolution, 1787-1804* (revised edition, 2009); *Liberty and Locality in Revolutionary France, 1760-1820: Six Villages Compared, 1760-1820* (2003); and *Reform and Revolution in France: the Politics of Transition, 1774-1791* (1995).

Thomas E. Kaiser is Professor of History at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. Author of more than twenty-five articles and book chapters on the *ancien régime* and the French Revolution, he is also co-author of *Europe, 1648-1815: From the Old Regime to the Age of Revolution* (2004), and co-editor of *Conspiracy in the French Revolution* (2007) and *From Deficit to Deluge: The Origins of the French*

Revolution (2011). His current research project is a monograph entitled “Marie-Antoinette and the Austrian Plot, 1748–1794.”

Marisa Linton is Reader in History at Kingston University, London. She is the author of *The Politics of Virtue in Enlightenment France* (2001) and a co-editor of *Conspiracy in the French Revolution* (2007). Other writings include the political ideas of Robespierre, friendship in Jacobin politics, Saint-Just and antiquity, and the intellectual origins of the French Revolution.

James Livesey works on the cultural history of the eighteenth-century Atlantic with an emphasis on the British Isles and France. Among his books, *Making Democracy in the French Revolution* (2001) established his position in the historiography of the French Revolution. A current project is on the origins of social change in the Languedoc, a new approach toward synthesizing European history.

Peter McPhee was appointed to a Personal Chair at the University of Melbourne in 1993 and was the university’s provost in 2007–9. He has published widely on the history of modern France, most recently *Living the French Revolution* (2006) and *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life* (2012). He is a Fellow of both the Australian Academy of the Humanities and the Academy of Social Sciences.

Jean-Clément Martin is Emeritus Professor at Paris-1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University, and former director of the Institut d’Histoire de la Révolution Française. He wrote his “Thèse d’État” on the War of the Vendée and its memory (Paris IV, 1989). His recent publications are *Violence et Révolution* (2006); *La Révolte brisée* (2008); *La Machine à fantasme* (2012); and the editing of *Dictionnaire de la Contre-Révolution* (2011).

Laura Mason is Senior Lecturer in History at Johns Hopkins University. The author of *Singing the French Revolution: Popular Culture and Politics* (1996) and co-author of *The French Revolution: A Document Collection* (1998), she is completing a book about the conspiracy trial of Gracchus Babeuf and the politics of the Directory.

Sarah Maza, Northwestern University, is a specialist in the social and cultural history of France from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. Her books include *Private Lives and Public Affairs: The Causes Célèbres of Pre-Revolutionary France* (1993); *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie: An Essay on the Social Imaginary, 1750-1850* (2003); and *Violette Nozière: A Story of Murder in 1930s Paris* (2011).

Noelle Plack is Reader in French History at Newman University College, Birmingham. Her research interests concern the rural dimensions of the French Revolution as well as the social history of wine and drinking in Revolutionary and Napoleonic France. In addition to numerous articles and chapters, she is the author of *Common Land, Wine and the French Revolution* (2009).

Mike Rapport teaches European history at the University of Stirling in Scotland. Among his books are *Nationality and Citizenship in Revolutionary France: The Treatment of Foreigners, 1789-1799* (2000) and *Nineteenth-Century Europe, 1789-1914* (2005). His most recent book is *1848: Year of Revolution* (2008), but he remains mostly obsessed with the French Revolution and its wider impact.

Frédéric Régent is “Maître de Conférences” in Modern History at the University of Paris 1-Panthéon-Sorbonne in the Institut d’Histoire de la Révolution Française. He is the author of *Esclavage, métissage, liberté: La Révolution*

française en Guadeloupe (1789-1802) (2004) and *La France et ses esclaves, de la colonisation aux abolitions (1620-1848)* (2007).

Barry M. Shapiro is Professor of History at Allegheny College, Meadville, Pennsylvania. He is the author of *Revolutionary Justice in Paris, 1789-1790* (1993) and *Traumatic Politics: The Deputies and the King in the Early French Revolution* (2009), and of several articles on psychohistory, revolutionary justice, and early revolutionary politics. He is currently working on a study of the negotiation process that led to the end of apartheid in South Africa.

Miranda Spieler is an Associate Professor in the History Department at the University of Arizona. Her research focuses on the relationship between law and violence in France and the colonies during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. She is the author of *Empire and Underworld: Captivity in French Guiana* (2012).

Donald Sutherland studied at the University of Sussex and the University of London. He has taught in the United Kingdom, Canada, and, since 1986, at the University of Maryland. Among his published work is *The French Revolution and Empire: The Quest for a Civic Order* (2003). His latest book is *Murder in Aubagne: Lynching, Law and Justice in the French Revolution* (2009).

Dale Van Kley, Professor of Early Modern European History, Ohio State University, has published and edited several books and many articles. Among the books are *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: From Calvin to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, 1560-1791* (1996) and, with Tom Kaiser, *From Deficit to Deluge: The Origins of the French Revolution* (2011). Among his edited volumes is *The*

French Idea of Freedom: The Old Regime and the Declaration of Rights of 1789 (1994).

Anne Verjus has been a researcher at the Centre National de Recherches Scientifiques since 1998. She is currently working at the “Laboratoire Triangle” of the University of Lyon. She has published many books and articles on citizenship during the revolutionary period as well as a book, in collaboration with Denise Z. Davidson, on conjugal correspondence, *Le Roman conjugal: Chroniques de la vie familiale à l’époque de la Révolution et de l’Empire* (2011).

Edward J. Woell is an Associate Professor of History at Western Illinois University in Macomb and the author of *Small-Town Martyrs and Murderers: Religious Revolution and Counterrevolution in Western France, 1774-1914* (2006). Currently he is researching religion in the small towns of eight regions during the French Revolution.

Isser Woloch is the Moore Collegiate Professor of History Emeritus at Columbia University. His books include *The New Regime: Transformations of the French Civic Order, 1789-1820s* (1994); *Napoleon and his Collaborators: The Making of a Dictatorship* (2001); and, with Gregory S. Brown, *Eighteenth-Century Europe: Tradition and Progress, 1715-1789* (2nd edition, 2012).

Abbreviations

<i>AHR</i>	<i>American Historical Review</i>
<i>AHRF</i>	<i>Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française</i> (<i>AHRF</i> changed from volumes to individual issue numbers in 1977)
<i>Annales</i>	<i>Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales</i>
CNRS	Centre National de Recherches Scientifiques
CTHS	Comité des Travaux Historiques et Scientifiques
ÉHÉSS	École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales
<i>HER</i>	<i>English Historical Review</i>
<i>FH</i>	<i>French History</i>
<i>FHS</i>	<i>French Historical Studies</i>
<i>HJ</i>	<i>Historical Journal</i>
<i>JMH</i>	<i>Journal of Modern History</i>
<i>JSH</i>	<i>Journal of Social History</i>
<i>P&P</i>	<i>Past and Present</i>
PUF	Presses Universitaires de France
<i>RE</i>	<i>Revue Économique</i>
<i>RF</i>	<i>Révolution Française</i>
<i>RHMC</i>	<i>Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine</i>
SÉR	Société des Études Robespierristes

Introduction

PETER MCPHEE

In the years after 1789 French revolutionaries sought to remake their society on the basis of the principles of popular sovereignty and civic equality. This was an awesome challenge in a large, diverse kingdom hitherto structured on custom, corporate and provincial privileges, and exemptions. Others, both French and foreign, took up arms in an attempt to destroy a revolution seen to be inimical to established practices of social hierarchy, religious belief, and authority.

In June 1789 commoner deputies to the Estates-General in Versailles vowed to achieve constitutional government; on 14 July several thousand armed Parisians seized the Bastille fortress in eastern Paris. Ever since, people have debated the origins and meaning of what had happened. By the time of Napoleon Bonaparte's seizure of power in December 1799, the first historians of the Revolution had begun to outline their narratives of these years and their judgments about the consequences of revolutionary change. Why was there a Revolution in 1789? Why had it proved so difficult to stabilize a new regime based on representation and rights? Why did the Revolution take its particular course? What were the consequences of a decade of revolutionary change?

The drama, successes, and tragedies of the Revolution, and the scale of the attempts to arrest or reverse it, have attracted scholars to it for more than two centuries.^{[1](#)} Historians, like those who lived through those years, have agreed on the unprecedented and momentous nature of these and other acts of revolution in the months between

May and October 1789. They have never agreed, however, on why what came to be called the *ancien régime* was overthrown with such widespread support, nor on why the Revolution took its subsequent course or on its outcomes.

The bicentenary of the Revolution in 1989 coincided with a new wave of revolutions, this time against Soviet hegemony in eastern Europe. Celebrations of the bicentenary in Paris occurred in the aftermath of the crushing of student protests in Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Since the dominant historical interpretation of the French Revolution had been within a Marxist paradigm of explanation – that this was essentially a triumph for urban bourgeois and landholding peasants which accelerated the transition from feudalism to capitalism – historians and journalists hostile to the Revolution rushed to proclaim that the lesson of contemporary rebellion against communist regimes was that Marxism was “dead” both as a tool for historical understanding and as a guide to a better future. The French Revolution was “over.”²

Such claims were no more than wishful thinking. The consequences of the events of 1789 were so complex and significant that reflection and debate on their origins and course show no signs of concluding. The Revolution continues to fascinate, perplex, and inspire. The two great waves of revolutionary change since the 1980s – the overthrow of regimes in eastern and southeastern Europe and the “Arab spring” – have served to revivify our interest in the world-changing upheavals of the late eighteenth century. In the decades since 1989, however, a more supple and critical use of materialist explanations has been paralleled – and challenged – by the insights of discursive analysis and other forms of cultural history and by more probing application of categories drawn from histories of gender and race, often within a trans-Atlantic or even global context.³

This *Companion* showcases the ways in which historians now respond to the most fundamental questions about the French Revolution. Why and how did an apparently stable regime collapse in 1789? Why did it prove to be so difficult to stabilize a new order? Did the political instability of these years disguise a more fundamental social and economic continuity? Was the French Revolution a major turning-point in French – even world – history, or instead a protracted period of violent upheaval and warfare which wrecked millions of lives? The collection draws on the expertise of many of those historians whose fresh approaches to the era of the French Revolution both exemplify the great richness of current historical writing on these questions and point the way to future directions in revolutionary historiography. The twenty-nine contributions – from France, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia – have all been written specifically for this volume.⁴ Approaches vary from wide-ranging reflections about key concepts, such as rights, gender, and terror, to cutting-edge archive-based research. None of the authors would claim that theirs is the final word: like all fine historical writing, their chapters pose questions while advancing our understanding.

One of the most fundamental and difficult questions about the French Revolution has always been how to explain its origins. France was apparently the most stable kingdom in western Europe, so how might one best explain why and how revolution occurred in 1789? Historians have long debated whether there were deep-seated, long-term causes of the political friction which erupted in 1787, and whether there were clear lines of social antagonism. Some have insisted that political conflict was short-term and avoidable: the royal state may have been under critical financial pressure, but its collapse was the outcome of a contingent