Preface

Lynn Hunt

.....

Eugen Weber Professor of Modern European History, University of California, Los Angeles

Robert R. Palmer exemplified the best that historians have to offer. He wrote with conviction, empathy, and at times passion, yet he always managed to maintain balance and portray both the good and the bad in the people and events he brought to life for his readers. Because he wrote with conviction, he also wrote with exceptional clarity. He never displayed the impulse to hide behind highfalutin language, contorted prose, or excessively specialized topics. He believed that democracy was an absolute good, that it had its origins in European history, and that its rise provided one of, or even perhaps the principal theme of all of modern history. As a consequence, he never lost his sympathy for the French revolutionaries of 1789–1794, however terrible their actions, however much they fell short of living up to their ideals.

Palmer's empathy for his subjects could be seen in every one of his books, as the marvelous articles in this issue of *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* make so evident. He took on Catholic priests, the leaders of the Terror of 1793–1794, educational reformers, the famous and not so famous figures of the Dutch, Belgian, Polish, and Italian revolts in “the age of the democratic revolution,” and striking individuals such as the Jacobin turned liberal Marc-Antoine Jullien and “the mild revolutionary” Jean-Baptiste Say. In his later years, when he wrote about Jullien and Say, he may have been seeking out figures whose politics seemed particularly congenial to his own, but in his early writings he did not shy away from intellectuals and politicians who took positions far removed from anything personally familiar to him. He never chose counterrevolutionaries, strict traditionalists, or pro-slavery activists as his main focus, perhaps because they constituted a limit to even his capacious capacity for empathy. Yet, given the intense controversy that to this day surrounds the Terror, the Jacobins, and Robespierre, most readers still find Palmer's *Twelve Who Ruled*¹ surprisingly sympathetic to the deputies of the Committee of Public Safety, the central organizing instrument of the Terror.

Palmer wrote to make human decisions and actions comprehensible, not to establish his own moral superiority in hindsight. In taking this stance,

he exemplified the humility and even compassion that makes for good history. Although he believed that history in the West had a discernible trajectory, he did not portray history's actors as cogs in a mechanism they could not grasp for themselves. In fact, he was most fascinated by people who consciously confronted great dilemmas: the Catholic priests who tried to come to terms with Enlightenment values that threatened all they held dear; the Jacobins of 1793–1794 who faced war abroad, civil war at home, and popular demands for immediate retribution even while trying to build the basis for an enduring republic; or the Italian republicans, who even in defeat took the first crucial step toward the Risorgimento. Palmer was not particularly interested in the question of who won and who lost, in part no doubt because he believed that democracy would win in the long run, but also because he was more riveted by individuals who did their best in trying circumstances.

Palmer was my personal guide as I became an historian of the French Revolution. I did not know him—I met him only once or twice in the late 1980s—but like many others I came to know history first through his textbook, *A History of the Modern World*,² and then through *Twelve Who Ruled*. I have long since forgotten most of what I read in the textbook—it was a textbook after all—but I can easily recall my reaction to reading *Twelve Who Ruled*. It hooked me. Reading it, you felt like you were there, in the room, with members of the Committee of Public Safety who were coming and going, half awake after sleepless nights, alternately alarmed, thoughtful, determined, frustrated, and furious. Only Andrzej Wajda's 1983 film *Danton* can even come close to recapturing that same intense feeling of watching the tragedy unfold.

None of Palmer's other books had quite the same novelistic or cinematic quality as *Twelve Who Ruled*, but Palmer's eagerness to experiment with new formats never ceased. His *History of the Modern World* had an enduring influence because it offered a clear overarching narrative—the rise of modern values of secularism, tolerance, and democracy. His two big volumes on the democratic revolutions of the late eighteenth century brought together comparative histories of the United States, Great Britain, and all of continental Europe, and established the idea of an Atlantic world decades before the term became fashionable among historians.³ Indeed, his own vision went beyond the boundaries of the Atlantic and he expressed some reservation about it being so defined. His bursting of the usual confines of the history of the French Revolution in those volumes provoked considerable complaint and criticism, but only recently, with the rise of transnational and global history, have historians tried to do anything remotely like it.⁴ Yet another innovation in format can be found in his work on Jullien,⁵ which he describes as a book of selected translations, but is in fact a genre buster that combines historical analysis and biography with a kind of autobiography of Jullien constructed by Palmer out of Jullien's writings.

Palmer continued as my guide to the life of an historian even after he retired. He never lost his enthusiasm for writing history that was based on extensive research. He showed that historians need not retire from their roles as researchers and writers. Among the abiding attractions of the life of an historian is its capacity for variation: different roles (teacher, scholar, writer, and university administrator), different subjects for research, and diverse publics for which to write. Palmer's continuing curiosity took him to multiple roles, subjects, and publics.

Those who push at the boundaries, as Palmer did, often come in for a considerable share of criticism, and he proved no exception to this rule. His two-volume history of the age of democratic revolution prompted some vitriolic responses when it appeared, especially among those who wanted to believe that the French Revolution was entirely exceptional and that any attempt to amalgamate it with other Atlantic movements therefore disguised a hidden Cold War agenda of unifying the NATO countries against the communist world. As social history gained momentum in the United States, the earlier criticisms sometimes blended with those concerned with Palmer's blind spots about race, class, and gender. For example, Marcus Rediker, in a review of Harriet Applegate and Darline Levy's 1990 edited volume *Women and Politics in the Age of the Democratic Revolution* maintained that it was "a major contribution to an immensely important project—the rethinking of R. R. Palmer's *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*." "Palmer's liberal capitalist Atlanticism," Rediker argued, "provided some of the intellectual underpinnings of NATO and the Cold War," but "is now being challenged in a variety of ways by social historians who wish to draw upon radical scholarship of the past twenty-five years to rewrite the history of Atlantic revolution from the bottom up."⁶

Palmer himself recognized that he had overlooked some areas that became increasingly central to historians' preoccupations in the 1970s and afterward. He should not be found at fault, however, for pursuing the interests that seemed germane to him at the time (and he never ignored the popular revolutions even if he sometimes expressed concerns about their effects). The focus of historians changes as the times change. What I wrote in the 1970s lacked an interest in culture and gender, what I wrote in the 1980s and 1990s lacked an interest in race and the revolution outside of France, and what I wrote in the 2000s will no doubt prove inadequate in yet some other way as new perspectives develop in the 2010s and beyond. It is more productive for historians to follow Palmer's own example and attend to what their predecessors did right rather than dwelling anachronistically on how they did not measure up to later standards. Palmer's remarkable career shows, as the articles in this volume emphasize, that though we cannot entirely break out of the envelope of current practices and concerns, both academic and political, we can continually push against it. That may be a heroism of relatively small deeds, but for me it is heroic nonetheless.

Notes

1. R. R. Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled: The Year of the Terror in the French Revolution* (Princeton, NJ, 1941). Reprinted as a Princeton Classical Edition in 2005.
2. R. R. Palmer, *A History of the Modern World* (New York, 1950). The newest edition, co-authored by Palmer, Joel Colton, and Lloyd Kramer, is the tenth edition (New York, 2006).
3. R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution, 1760–1800*, Vol. 1: *The Challenge*, Vol. 2: *The Struggle* (Princeton, NJ, 1959, 1964).
4. The most pertinent example would be Christopher Alan Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Malden, MA, 2004).
5. *From Jacobin to Liberal: Marc-Antoine Juillen, 1775–1848*, ed. R. R. Palmer (Princeton, NJ, 1993).
6. Marcus Rediker, “Review: Harriet B. Applewhite and Darline G. Levy, *Women and Politics in the Age of the Democratic Revolution*,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 115, no. 2 (1991): 257–258.