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Raymond Birn. *Royal Censorship of Books in Eighteenth-Century France.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012. xii + 195 pp. $60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-6359-2.

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Censorship and the State in the French Enlightenment

In 1699, the newly appointed royal chancellor of France, Louis II Phélypeaux, comte de Pontchartrain, successfully imposed royal authority over all prepublication censorship, forcing aside all previous censorship authorities, including university faculty, bishops, and parlementary magistrates. In a tour de force of Old Regime statism, Pontchartrain publicly embarrassed Sorbonne professors by implicating them with heretical religious views, undermined Gallican Episcopal independence, and maneuvered the Parlement of Paris into relinquishing its remaining rights to judge printed material. Instructing his nephew, the Abbé Jean-Paul Bignon, to direct the Department of the Book Trade (Direction de la librairie), Pontchartrain authorized the recruitment of state-appointed royal censors henceforth in charge of examining every publication request in the kingdom.

Thus began a new regime of state-controlled censorship in France, a system in operation from 1699 until its collapse during the French Revolution. This is the subject of Raymond Birn's excellent book, *Royal Censorship of Books in Eighteenth-Century France.* Although four of the seven chapters were previously published in French, the present volume, exhaustively mining the archival materials of the Department of the Book Trade held in the Department of Manuscripts at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, adds three additional chapters to take Birn's study of royal censorship through the prerevolutionary and revolutionary eras. The book is an invaluable contribution to our understanding not just of the quotidian functioning of an Old Regime institution, but also of Old Regime culture, Enlightenment ideals, and the relationship between state and society.

One curious fact in particular about Bignon's directorship of the Department of the Book Trade highlights the value of Birn's scholarly contribution: one of the first royal censors whom Bignon appointed was his friend, the celebrated polymath, Bernard de Fontenelle. By 1699, Fontenelle was widely recognized as a preeminent and even daring French author, particularly famous for his 1686 work, *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (*Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds*)–considered by many scholars to be one of the first great literary works of the French Enlightenment. In addition to appointing him a royal censor, Bignon also made Fontenelle perpetual secretary of the reformed and rejuvenated Royal Academy of Sciences. One of Fontenelle's principal duties was to popularize and explain the specialized work of savants (scientists) to the educated public. Fontenelle's academic eulogies, read aloud during annual public meetings of the academy and published in an annual academy *Histoire*, were literary masterpieces by means of which Fontenelle articulated high moral ideals for the sciences, thereby voicing the *esprit philosophique*, the rationalist and practical ethic of the Enlightenment.[1]

Fontenelle's advocacy of supposedly open, critical, rationalist Enlightenment values would seem to be at odds with his apparent support for the supposedly closed, repressive, and authoritarian values of a state that engaged in active censorship. And Fontenelle was hardly alone. As Birn and other historians have noted, many of the royal censors of the eighteenth century were major or minor figures of the Enlightenment and upheld what we would usually define as Enlightenment values. Far from being mere state bureaucrats, the royal censors contracted to examine manuscripts for printing permission were the equivalent of early modern professionals: savants, academicians, lawyers, writers, and serious theologians. Most of them advocated open and critical public debate about politics, social reform, the sciences, and religion, especially in the later third of the century. Birn, in fact, argues that censors are more usefully seen as "cultural intermediaries" than as "agents of repression" (see chapter 4). How do historians reconcile this apparent contradiction of values?

Understanding this apparent contradiction, in fact, has been a crucial historiographical problem for scholars of the Enlightenment era, ultimately boiling down to the perennial question: what is the Enlightenment? Focusing in great detail on the intricacies of royal censorship, Birn floats happily above the fray, yet his research undermines many of the grand attempts to define the French Enlightenment too narrowly or according to current ideas of modernity. Birn rarely mentions other historians by name–in particular, offering muted and modest criticism of two: Darrin M. McMahon and Jonathan Israel. His essays here, however, suggest that many attempts to define the Enlightenment fall short by failing to comprehend the widespread impact of the *esprit philosophique* in Old Regime France. The book also shows that, whereas French intellectual life throughout the eighteenth century was lively and marked in general by a desire for open, rational, practical debate limited by good taste, self-discipline, and moderation, there was little ideological constancy over time. Ultimately, Birn's work presents an Enlightenment that seems more a zeitgeist or a culture than a program or ideology–close to Dan Edelstein's argument that the Enlightenment was "an aggregate of ideas, actions, and events," and a "matrix in which ideas, actions, and events acquired new meaning."[2] Birn's book also reveals the nuances of an Enlightenment-era culture that is satisfyingly human in its messiness and lack of consistency.

Historians, of course, have long found it tempting to define the Enlightenment according to a narrative of secular modernity in which Enlightenment heroes–in France, names like Voltaire, Jean le Rond d'Alembert, Denis Diderot, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, etc.–fought an ideological battle against the forces of reaction and oppression–the church, absolute monarchy, reactionary nobles. In Peter Gay's famous two-volume study, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (1966-69), the Enlightenment was "the science of freedom." In more recent studies, the Enlightenment became the product of the Republic of Letters, the intellectual core of a nascent public sphere, emerging alongside the institutions of the absolute monarchy, but in a sort of dialectical mode, with an open ethic and sociability fundamentally opposed to the closed culture of the monarchy–which, after all, censored speech![3] How do we maintain the notion of an ideological culture war with clearly defined combatants, however, when we pause to consider Fontenelle, and any number of later philosophes, who not only benefited from the monarchy but also worked to support it? One way has been to suggest that the departments and ministries of the monarchy–including the Department of the Book Trade–were themselves eventually infiltrated by enlighteners, much to the chagrin of the defenders of traditional values, who, as McMahon argues, found their own aggressive and even extremist *antiphilosophique* literature driven underground.[4] Israel argues explicitly that by the 1750s, "royal censorship had itself become part of the Enlightenment and was consciously seeking to promote social progress and streamline administration."[5] Birn finds such arguments unconvincing because they continue to represent the Enlightenment as a static ideological program–less as it was actually experienced by most participants and more from the point of view of extremists: "As a consequence of examining their reports," Birn writes, "I see royal censors neither as closet enlighteners nor as irrelevant witnesses to the theological, cultural, and scientific debates of the last thirty years of the ancien régime" (p. 116).

Birn's assessment, in fact, is closer to Robert Darnton's argument about censorship in *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (1996), but from the opposite side of the field. Whereas Darnton seeks to understand the books that circulated illegally, Birn wants to explain the mechanisms of permission. As Darnton writes, "The very notion of legality in literature remained fuzzy, because the authorities in charge of the book trade constantly fudged the line that separated the licit from the illicit."[6] Where Darnton implies that corruption, confusion, and general incompetence weakened an otherwise nasty and repressive censorship machinery ("The Bastille was no three-star hotel," Darnton helpfully reminds us), Birn sees censors almost invariably as honest men doing a very difficult job: "censors were sensitive to their responsibilities, though their tolerance of texts often had more to do with pragmatism or economic factors than with Enlightenment principles of press freedom" (p. 117).[7] Ultimately, Birn's research reveals some of the internal complexities and nuances of French intellectual culture in the era of the Enlightenment, thus situating the book among such works as April Shelford's *Transforming the Republic of Letters* (2007) and, more recently, Dan Edelstein's *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy* (2010), which argue that the Enlightenment cannot be defined by a single ideological position, and that it encompassed many and even contradictory religious, political, social, and economic points of view.

In chapters 1 through 4, Birn pieces together the jigsaw puzzle of royal censorship from 1699 until the prerevolutionary era. I say jigsaw puzzle, because although an overall picture appears, it was composed of many differently shaped parts, such as the complexity of a cultural milieu that was changing over time, political trans-

formations, different censorship directors with evolving agendas, many different censors with their own ideas and principles, differing categories of publication, and so on. In general, the picture that emerges is of a fragile censorship authority responding to and compromising with a complicated environment, and lacking clear, fixed criteria for censorship–in fact, finding it impossible to establish clear criteria. In the beginning, for example, censors awarded examined books a simple *privilège* or a sealed permission (*permission de sceau*). Over time, however, censors found that necessity dictated finding ways of authorizing printing permission for many books that because of their subjects or arguments could not be granted a royal privilege, but which were not such that censors desired completely to forbid them. Such books might be works that would circulate clandestinely anyway, and in even more intolerable form, were they not allowed by the state in some way. Thus, the Department of the Book Trade invented the *permission tacite*, which at least enabled some level of control and allowed French printers (instead of foreign ones) to garner the profit from legal printing, but which did not protect the book from piracy or seizure. Censors eventually even advised or instructed printers to use a false publication address, such as Geneva or London, for such permissions. For even more risqué books, censors might authorize a verbal tolerance–a sort of "go ahead and print the book, but we know nothing about it" status. Book publishing was, after all, a business. To complicate matters yet further, authors might appeal directly to a minister, or a censor might refuse to take the risk of making a judgment and appeal to the director, who might appeal to a minister himself for an extraordinary ministerial decision about a book.

One of Birn's greatest contributions is his careful analysis of why royal censors chose to grant privileges, sealed permission, tacit permissions, or verbal tolerances. Before 1758, the Department of the Book Trade in fact showed a high level of forbearance. Even in the dangerous area of religious or theological books where censors had to "define the boundaries of intellectual orthodoxy," Birn shows that "nine of every ten titles brought before a state examiner passed muster the first time around" (p. 13). In less worrisome subjects, such as history, travelogues, belles-lettres, the sciences, and medicine, censors showed themselves to be concerned less with repression than with mental discipline and good taste. They condemned "superstitious themes, naiveté, and disorderly, nonclassical style," and "enthusiasm, credulity, the fantastic, and the vulgar" (pp. 15-16). In specialized and scientific writing, censors disapproved of "inexactitude, superstition, and inelegance of style," and approved of books that showed "gracefulness, exactitude, reason, and empirical validity" (pp. 19-20).

Nevertheless, however professional, educated, and enlightened censors were, they were only human and could make mistakes. In chapter 2, Birn focuses on a famous censorship scandal that nearly brought down the Department of the Book Trade: the bad decision by an overworked censor, Jean-Pierre Tercier, to grant in 1758 a royal privilege to an obviously "dangerous" book, Claude-Adrien Helvétius's *De l'esprit* (*On the Mind*), which rejected free will, the immortality of the soul, and religious morality. The mistake cost Tercier his positions as censor and first secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; embarrassed Helvétius; and nearly enabled the Parlement of Paris, which presented itself as the defender of the "kingdom's moral values," to restore its censorship authority (p. 31). Malesherbes, the director of the Department of the Book Trade, found himself forced not only to retract the permission of *On the Mind*, also but to submit to the Parlement's desire to forbid Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, which Malesherbes had hitherto protected. Subsequently, Malesherbes vainly sought to strengthen the Department of the Book Trade by clarifying the work of the censors, but also to convince the monarchy to be yet more tolerant of texts–not because he was an Enlightenment mole trying to undermine conservative authority, but because it was eminently practical to be tolerant: "If denied publication in France, the manuscripts were sent abroad," writes Birn, "where they found their way into print. Subsequently they returned to France as illicit literature" (p. 33) "Malesherbes desired to keep legitimate print shops working and to drive clandestine shops out of business. The most appropriate means of maintaining a steady flow of printed matter was the toleration of ideas" (p. 34).

In the years after the *On the Mind* scandal, as Birn examines in chapters 3 and 4, censors found that their work only became more difficult and confusing–for what, exactly, was their job? Censors in the sciences were usually members of the Academy of Sciences, but at least half were also contributors to the *Encyclopédie*. Censors in theology preferred to avoid controversy than to defend orthodoxy. Censors in medicine, physics, and natural history tried vainly to define good methods and silence quackery, pseudo-science, and general incompetence. Censors in belles-lettres, often themselves in favor of political reforms (and perhaps writing critical, reform-minded works on their own!), struggled to walk the line between fulfilling their jobs as royal censors and encouraging public debates. Birn relates the fascinating example of the censor François-Louis-Claude Marin evaluating

in 1761 a philosophical novel called "Dream of a Modern Aristarchus," which exposed government corruption and hypocrisy. Marin knew the work could never be acknowledged by the director with any sort of privilege or permission, but he wanted the book to appear nonetheless. "He urged toleration, with a 'very tacit permission' (*'une permission trés tacite'*)–that is to say, without the printer's name, nor place of publication" (p. 64).

Censorship policy became yet more confused in the prerevolutionary era, as Birn explains in chapters 5 through 7. Ultimately, Birn writes, "censors were unable to come up with workable critical guideposts. As a consequence, their decisions appeared inconsistent and arbitrary" (p. 68). Increasingly, censors approved just about anything, so long as the composition was rhetorically moderate and did not engage in intended injury or libel: "an author's adoption of a moderate tone went far to win a censor's approval, irrespective of topic or position" (p. 77). If anything guided censors in the last decades of the century, it was a desire to promote public utility and public discussion, as well as an increasing general discomfort with rendering anything a prohibited status. The result was that censors began to question the worthwhileness of their work and some reasonable thinkers, such as the marquis de Condorcet, proposed eliminating royal censorship altogether. On the eve of the Revolution, a retired Malesherbes proposed that the censorship machinery only be maintained for the protection of writers: those authors who chose to receive a *privilège* would be guaranteed immunity from any possible parlementary court proceedings. By 1789, however, the entire censorship process simply dissolved and censors resigned their posts.

As I wrote at the beginning of this review, Birn's study of royal censorship in the eighteenth century reveals far more than the quotidian functioning of an Old Regime institution; royal censorship is a lens through which to examine the transformation of French culture in the era of the Enlightenment leading to the Revolution. Over the course of the eighteenth century, royal censors helped to shape their culture by negotiating the boundaries of acceptable forms of publication. Driven by necessity, principles, politics, and ideals, the censors lurched toward a country in which what was tolerable widened considerably. As Birn concludes, "bureaucratic prepublication censorship yielded place to authorial self-censorship" (p. 117). Any student of the Old Regime, the Enlightenment, and the French Revolution will find Birn's book enlightening and useful. Furthermore, the wealth of historical detail that he employs about royal censorship is highly engaging and exposes the humanity of the censors, authors, booksellers, and political authorities of Old Regime France so well that I, for one, both enjoyed the book as a scholar and could readily incorporate Birn's research into my courses that cover the history of the Old Regime.

Notes

[1]. See Gregory Matthew Adkins, "When Ideas Matter: The Moral Philosophy of Fontenelle," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 61, no. 3 (July 2000): 433-452.

[2]. Dan Edelstein, *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 13.

[3]. See Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); and Daniel Gordon, *Citizens without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociability in French Thought, 1670-1789* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

[4]. Darrin M. McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 42.

[5]. Jonathan Israel, "French Royal Censorship and the Battle to Suppress the Encyclopédie of Diderot and D'Alembert, 1751-1759," *The Uses of Censorship in the Enlightenment*, ed. Mogens Lærke (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 69.

[6]. Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: Norton, 1996), 3-4.

[7]. Ibid., 6.

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