

David H. Pinkney — *Decisive Years in France, 1840-1847*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986. Pp. 235.

This work, by a senior, distinguished, and much respected historian of nineteenth-century France, is an extended interpretive essay calling attention to the 1840s as an important, but insufficiently studied, decade for the development of modern France. As Pinkney states: "The principal thesis of the book is that the years 1840-47, long regarded as a backwater in French history, were uniquely decisive and seminal years in the century and a half of between the Revolution of 1789 and the fall of the Third Republic in 1940" (p. 4). Professor Pinkney, from his works on the Revolution of 1830 and on Paris under the Second Empire, should be in a position to know, and indeed, this book contains much about France in the 1840s to arouse interest. He cites those characteristics of French society of the 1820s and 1830s that were still typical of the Old Regime. He gives much attention to economic developments of the 1840s, and particularly to the railroad act of 1842 and importance of railroad building for stimulating, on one hand, the iron and mining industries, and on the other hand, communications and internal trade. These developments had a basic causal importance in furthering other aspects of rapid modernization: increasing administrative centralization, a new awareness of the professions and of the social problems accompanying industrialization, trends in the arts, and emergence in foreign policy of a more self-conscious colonialism. The huge expansion of the postal system, stimulated by the railroads, and the Guizot education act (of 1833), helped to promote a new sense of unity and awareness in the middle class, and also to increase dependence of local government on Paris. The opening of libraries, such as the Bibliothèque de St-Geneviève in Paris, which was both a prototype of an iron supported structure and more accessible to general readers through longer evening hours, helped to further dissemination of the flowering of works of socialist writers, as did expansion of the popular press. Significant works were written in the 1840s that forecast literary developments of the later Empire, such as much of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* (which was not published until 1857), and the early version of Flaubert's *Education Sentimentale* (which was not published in final form until 1869).

But to this reviewer, Pinkney's argument seems more appropriate for calling attention to a neglected period than it does for convincing one of the "decisive" importance of the 1840s in French economic and social development. It is very difficult to identify a single decade in the nineteenth century as the most "decisive" one for France, and the evidence Pinkney cites, in fact, spills back into the 1830s and earlier years of the century, and forward into the 1850s and 1860s. A part of the problem is the author's heavy dependence on Walter W. Rostow's hypothesis, of nearly thirty years ago, of a relatively short period of "take-off" at the beginning of industrialization when a leading sector, such as Pinkney identifies in railroads, iron, and coal, might have a crucial importance in stimulating sustained economic growth. In the comparative discussion of "take-off" evoked by Rostow during the 1960s, it proved to be very difficult for economic historians to identify a specific "take-off" decade in the economy of any European nation of the nineteenth century, and France, because of its very large and diverse economy, was one of the most difficult cases for easy application of this scheme. French economic development occurred gradually across many decades, and there were not clearly identifiable leading sectors; no one decade experienced a clear jump in acceleration. This consideration may help to explain why Pinkney has difficulty finding as many significant factors as he would like in his "decisive" years, and his heavy dependence on Rostow's model may offend some readers. Nonetheless, this is a highly intelligent essay, which will help to restore some attention the 1840s currently lacks.

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