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2001 (review)

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The Year's Work in Modern Language Studies. Volume 60. 1998. Edited by STEPHEN PARKINSON and others. Leeds, Maney Publishing for the Modern Humanities Research Association, 1999. xi + 1047 pp.

The Year's Work in Modern Language Studies. Volume 61. 1999. Edited by STEPHEN PARKINSON and others. Leeds, Maney Publishing for the Modern Humanities Research Association, 2000. xi + 1012 pp.

The Year's Work in Modern Language Studies. Volume 62. 2000. Edited by STEPHEN PARKINSON and others. Leeds, Maney Publishing for the Modern Humanities Research Association, 2001. xi + 1072 pp.

The Year's Work in Modern Language Studies. Volume 63. 2001. Edited by STEPHEN PARKINSON and others. Leeds, Maney Publishing for the Modern Humanities Research Association, 2003. xi + 1052 pp.

The editors and publishers of *The Year's Work* have resumed their custom of sending copies out for review, after a four-year silence that seems suspiciously to date from the last (relatively hostile) notice I published in these pages. But one should not suspect malice when incompetence is likelier to be the cause. Perhaps one should even draw a veil over incompetence when the publication is so clearly a voluntary one meant for the benefit of us all, and when we all owe gratitude to the contributors for a tiresome and thankless task. I think it is one that should particularly be singled out as a vital collective contribution to knowledge when learned societies are asked to comment on the criteria used in Research Assessment Exercises.

The fact remains that the enterprise could be sharpened up. We are still stuck with the historical absurdity I have criticized before à propos of the French section, 'The Romantic Era'; and I see that our Germanists are stuck with it too. The time has come for the French nineteenth century to be a single entity, like the three preceding centuries, and to do away with a concept that few working in the field tell me they now entertain or could even define by dates or authors. One troubling feature of this archaic categorization is that it implies a particular interest in the earlier part of the nineteenth century that has not been the case — at least for French — these last sixty years. Let it go, and divide the period by genres if it is otherwise too unwieldy. By contrast, in the francophone world, Caribbean, African and Maghreb, together with Canadian writing, now very properly form separate sections. Perhaps one day the *Year's Work* will come to agree with me about dividing the metropolitan French twentieth century at 1958 instead of 1945, as the post-1945 period begins to stretch dangerously beyond sagging-point and the short age of Gide and Proust and Valéry seems to contain almost no-one else much worth writing about any longer. I guess the same will shortly be true of the period immediately after the Second World War. It has inordinately and incomprehensibly dominated French studies in this country for fifty years, even at the secondary school level, although the French themselves have long since moved on — or even back.

When I last reviewed *The Year's Work*, I was quite severe about omissions, but of course one understands that volunteers may not always be available. The way to deal with that is admirably illustrated over these four volumes by the treatment of the French eighteenth century, made clear in volume 60, where the

information is very limited with the default to be made up in succeeding volumes. And indeed it is amply made up. This is very much better than the infamous asterisk system. The asterisk frankly means ‘I haven’t bothered or been able to read this, and now I shall never have to give you my opinion. Nor — and this is a crucial point — will anyone else, because this title has hereby been registered’. I think its use would be tolerable if it clearly implied ‘This is *prima facie* a tangential or eccentric publication’, or perhaps ‘It is impossible to obtain a copy of this work, given the remote circumstances of its publication’. Otherwise I think its use should now be outlawed. One would much rather wait a year and have an informed opinion expressed. It may be argued that this would imply a tension between the year ostensibly covered by the volume and the date of the publication omitted. But this is already the case with the postponed sections. I am glad to see that starrng is anyway appearing less and less in the French sections, in contrast to the virtual Milky Way of the modern Latin American section, which, with magic realism, even tells us what unseen books ‘appear to be about’ (vol. 60, p. 339).

I also previously expressed a desire for more evident sifting, so that really significant publications were distinguished from the multitude of conference papers and the like. Some contributors seem to have taken this idea to heart. An instance is Angela Kimyongür in her 1900–1945 section in volume 60. Here the really big books on Proust that came out in 1998 — the year of Marion Schmid’s *Processes of Literary Creation* and Malcolm Bowie’s *Proust Among the Stars* — come first and are discussed quite fully, and only then the hundreds of lesser contributions. There is a kind of pedestrian methodicality behind the contributions to earlier French periods that seems to militate against this sort of emphasis, and I wish it could be abolished. We need to have highlighted what is really important. It is a pleasure to be able to report that several of the younger contributors in French have to adopt a pose of modesty when they indicate that significant work in a particular field is their own. Here I single out Catherine Reuben and Catherine Léglu, both in volume 62. This is a welcome development, as opposed to the situation that once obtained whereby an idiosyncratic approach to the period by unreliably eccentric contributors could lead to a loss to the record of whole swathes of scholarly activity. These lacunae can never, alas, retrospectively be filled (and should never have been allowed, for surely even a rudimentary element of peer review would have instantly highlighted their eccentricity); and so it is only now that the *Year’s Work* can begin to be recommended alongside Klapp and other essential bibliographical starting-points for research. Here one must single out the heroically discreet effort made by the late Pat Short to return the seventeenth-century French section to something resembling normality in its coverage, and regret his relatively early recent death. But that these volumes can now be so recommended must be a matter of pride for all those who so selflessly contribute to them and edit them.

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