

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87850-0 - Commemorating the Dead in Revolutionary France: Revolution and Remembrance, 1789-1799

Joseph Clarke

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

Death came suddenly for Charles Dusson, a thirty-one-year-old apprentice from the rue de la Huchette in central Paris. Dusson, if he ever thought of such matters (and he probably did not, as he was preparing for his wedding in a few days' time), had no right to expect an extravagant requiem in the church of Saint-Séverin. He certainly had no reason to imagine that 'un très grand nombre de bourgeois' would line the route of his funeral procession, or that his coffin would be carried through the streets to the sound of drums beating 'd'une manière lugubre', or that a public collection would pay for all this solemnity.¹ Had Dusson lived out his natural span, he might instead have looked forward to a funeral fitting his social standing: a few, very few, candles flickering dimly in a side chapel, a hurried *De Profundis* and a quick march to the *fosse commune*.² His family, like Jacques Ménétra before him, would have kept a close eye on the ceremony to see that they got their money's worth of candles and that the priest performed the rites he had been paid for.³ Perhaps, as he grew older, he might have saved up for a more elaborate funeral, but probably not. For ordinary Parisians like Dusson, a funeral was generally a shabby affair, a far cry from the multitude of mourners and 'pompe attendrissante' that accompanied this young tradesman to the grave.⁴ Charles Dusson had no right to expect any of these things, but his death was different: he had died 'courageusement', 'en volant au secours de la patrie' at the Bastille, and because of this, his funeral four days later stood convention on its head.⁵

Jean-Denis Blanc's death a day after Dusson's was just as unexpected. A respected provincial lawyer with a mildly radical reputation, Blanc had been unwell for some time, but this had not stopped him being elected by the commoners of Besançon to attend the Estates General in Versailles. Once there, Blanc melted anonymously into the swarming mass of deputies and

¹ S.-P. Hardy, *Mes loisirs, ou journal d'événements tels qu'ils parviennent à ma connoissance*, B. N. ms. fonds français, no. 6687, vol. viii, pp. 395–6.

² L.-S. Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1994 edn), vol. i, p. 644.

³ J.-L. Ménétra, *Journal de ma vie*, ed. D. Roche (Paris, 1982), p. 38.

⁴ Hardy, *Mes loisirs*, p. 396. ⁵ *Ibid.*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87850-0 - Commemorating the Dead in Revolutionary France: Revolution and Remembrance, 1789-1799

Joseph Clarke

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 Commemorating the dead in Revolutionary France

made little or no impact during the Estates' first few months – until, that is, the momentous sitting of 15 July 1789, when Louis XVI arrived to announce his intention to cooperate with the new National Assembly. After the tension of the preceding weeks, the king's appearance sent the deputies into ecstasies, but it was all too much for the unfortunate Blanc and he collapsed on the spot, overcome by 'la joie qu'a éprouvée ce député', as one bystander put it.⁶ His remains were shipped home for burial in Besançon where, on 28 July, a great crowd gathered in the cathedral of Saint-Jean to hear Archbishop de Durfort say a solemn requiem for their ill-fated representative. The cream of Besançon society, the *parlementaires* in their ceremonial robes and over two hundred National Guardsmen in mourning, turned out for this 'triste, quoique magnifique spectacle' and many were moved 'jusques aux larmes'.⁷ As one observer noted: 'il serait impossible de rendre à un Roi . . . des honneurs funèbres plus grands que ceux qui ont été rendus aujourd'hui à M. Blanc'.⁸ For a commoner, even a local luminary like Blanc, it was an extraordinary tribute.

After more than two centuries, Dusson and Blanc are both long forgotten. Their deaths, though dramatic at the time, now appear unremarkable. At best, they stand out as simply the first casualties of what was to become a decade, even a generation, of continuous conflict and upheaval. At worst, they are just two among the hundreds of thousands of Frenchmen and women who died violent or sudden deaths during the Revolutionary decade. Their funerals are, however, another matter, because these are the two earliest examples of what was rapidly to become a recurring theme in Revolutionary political culture: the commemoration of the Revolution's dead. From 1789's requiem masses to the commemorative cults of the Terror and the vast military funerals that marked the closing years of the Republic, Revolutionaries of all political hues commemorated an eclectic assortment of heroes with an even more encyclopaedic array of ceremonies and cenotaphs, speeches and souvenirs. Some of those honoured – Mirabeau, Voltaire and Rousseau, for example – were household names whose fame long pre-dated the Revolution; the majority, like Dusson, the dead of 10 August 1792 or the Republic's war dead, were distinguished only for having died in its defence. Others, like Jean-Paul Marat, had risen from relative obscurity to national prominence on the tide of Revolutionary politics, but more, like Guillaume Simonneau in 1792 or Joseph Sauveur the following year, achieved this distinction only in death. Some, like Blanc or the thoroughly anonymous *conventionnel* Jean Féraud, killed on 1 Prairial *an III* because he was mistaken for the *muscadins'* mouthpiece Fréron, were simply

⁶ *AM*, no. 19, 16 July 1789, p. 163.

⁷ *Honneurs funèbres rendus à M. Blanc, premier député du Tiers-Etat de cette ville* (Paris, 1789), p. 6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87850-0 - Commemorating the Dead in Revolutionary France: Revolution and Remembrance, 1789-1799

Joseph Clarke

Excerpt

[More information](#)

unlucky. It would, as a rule, take more than a weak heart or a misunderstanding to warrant such solemnities, but sometimes not much more.⁹ The heroes and the ceremonies varied over time, but this strange and sometimes macabre series of commemorations is one of the few constants in the cultural life of the Revolution. The great wave of Federations receded in the acrimonious summer of 1791; the festivals of Reason burned brightly for a few months in *an II* but were then stifled; and the Directory's moribund civic ceremonies simply never got off the ground, but the Revolution always had its dead to bury.

From attending a memorial mass or commemorative parade to raising a Panthéon or purchasing a cheap political souvenir, the Revolutionary experience of commemoration was a remarkably diverse one, and this diversity raises a whole range of questions: questions concerning the rôle played by remembrance in Revolutionary politics, but also questions as to the place of the dead in eighteenth-century French culture. Some of these questions seem obvious, but more only occurred to me as the sheer complexity of Revolutionary remembrance became apparent in the archives. Nevertheless, the questions that concern me most can be summarised simply enough. What did commemoration mean to the men and women who attended ceremonies, raised monuments and purchased busts and souvenirs in memory of the Revolution's dead? What traditions did these people draw upon when they came to remember their dead, and how did these traditions evolve to meet the ever-changing demands of Revolutionary politics, or change according to the social and cultural circumstances of those who did the remembering? In both Paris and the provinces, the variety of forms commemoration assumed was matched only by the diversity of the men it honoured, and this diversity presents its own problems. Honouring an individual with a national reputation like Mirabeau, or even an international standing like Voltaire, was obviously a quite different experience from attending an artisan's funeral in a Paris church or planting a tree in memory of an undistinguished soldier in a village in the Vaucluse; but how exactly did the difference affect the meaning of these rites?¹⁰ This difference, the difference between celebrating a politician or a *philosophe* renowned for his accomplishments but unknown as an individual and remembering a local hero, perhaps even a family member or a friend, raises what is, perhaps, the most elusive question of all. In a period when political considerations can so easily appear to overwhelm all other concerns, what private ends did the Revolution's rites of memory serve? What consolation did commemoration bring to those the dead left behind, and what conflicts arose

⁹ M. A. Baudot, *Notes historiques sur la Convention Nationale, le Directoire, l'Empire et l'exil des votants* (Paris, 1893), p. 108.

¹⁰ *Journal républicain de la Commune Sans-Nom, ci-devant Marseille*, no. 53, 2 pluviôse an II, p. 438.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87850-0 - Commemorating the Dead in Revolutionary France: Revolution and Remembrance, 1789-1799

Joseph Clarke

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 Commemorating the dead in Revolutionary France

from this relationship between the public and the private dimensions of remembrance?

For all the attention that commemoration has recently received, for all the interest lavished on ‘collective memory’ as an all-encompassing, albeit often elusive, conceptual category, such questions have rarely troubled most historians of commemoration in modern France. Some of them, admittedly, can never be answered. We will, for example, never really know what it meant to Charles Dusson’s fiancée to have heard her prospective husband acclaimed a hero, any more than we can ever understand what the villagers of tiny Pagny in the Jura made of the bust of Marat that replaced the cross in front of their parish church in *an II*. Nicolas Louet, describing Dusson’s funeral in his diary, recalled hearing that his bride-to-be was ‘inconsolable’ after her loss, but beyond this, no one else even recorded her name, let alone mentioned her feelings, while the little we know of Pagny’s monument to Marat is entirely due to Jacques Dulaure’s brief stop there during his flight to Switzerland in December 1793.¹¹ The sources do not exist to answer these particular questions; but a lack of evidence, the historian’s perennial excuse, cannot really explain the reluctance to ask them, because in their absence, other sources can be found to address similar questions in comparable situations. Rather, this reticence seems to stem from the assumption that the study of commemoration is merely a modish variation on a well-established theme, the making of the modern nation-state, updated in the light of the ‘new cultural history’, leavened with a little sociology (an allusion to Maurice Halbwachs is all but obligatory on such occasions), and illustrated with some overemphatic art.¹² Perhaps this is too harsh. Historians such as Maurice Agulhon, Robert Gildea, Jean-Claude Bonnet, Avner Ben-Amos and the contributors to Pierre Nora’s massive *Les Lieux de mémoire* have played a crucial rôle in prompting the current academic interest in questions of commemoration.¹³ And yet, for all the imagination and insight these scholars have brought to the study of collective memory in modern France, their emphasis has been almost exclusively political. The values their commemorations express are invariably those of an elite – the Republican notables who succumbed to Agulhon’s ‘statuomanie’, for instance – and the

¹¹ N. Louet, ‘Un provincial à Paris en juillet 1789: extraits du journal inédit de Nicolas Louet, avocat chaumontais’, ed. M. Guyard, *DHS* 20 (1988), pp. 33–54 (p. 44); J.-A. Dulaure, *Mémoires de Dulaure*, ed. M.L. de la Sicotière (Paris, 1862), p. 349.

¹² M. Halbwachs, *La Mémoire collective* (Paris, 1950).

¹³ To cite only some of the most influential studies of French collective memory, see M. Agulhon, ‘La “statuomanie” et l’histoire’, reprinted in Agulhon, *L’Histoire vagabonde*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1988), vol. i, pp. 135–85; R. Gildea, *The Past in French History* (New Haven, 1994); J.-C. Bonnet, *Naissance du Panthéon: Essai sur le culte des grands hommes* (Paris, 1998); A. Ben-Amos, *Funerals, Politics and Memory in Modern France, 1789–1799* (Oxford, 2000); P. Nora, ed. *Les Lieux de mémoire*, 7 vols. (Paris, 1984–93).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87850-0 - Commemorating the Dead in Revolutionary France: Revolution and Remembrance, 1789-1799

Joseph Clarke

Excerpt

[More information](#)

symbols, ceremonies and conflicts they have chosen to explore belong firmly to the public sphere, but rarely to the private.

Can the same be said of the remembrance of the dead in Revolutionary France? Perhaps, when the dead were distant figures, politicians or *philosophes*, their commemoration can be considered in largely political terms, although even this seems doubtful when the *philosophe* in question happens to be 'l'ami Jean-Jacques'; but what of those, like Dusson, who were known to many of the people who commemorated them? Can we, with any confidence, say that the congregation that assembled in Saint-Séverin on 18 July 1789 came together solely for reasons of state, or assume that the decision to mark the death of a familiar face from the *quartier*, a fiancé perhaps or a friend, was a purely political act? To consider commemoration in these terms, to view its ceremonies as simply conduits for a political message, the 'mémoire . . . déjà républicaine' of Bonnet's eighteenth-century *éloges*, for example, or to take its monuments as essentially the embodiment of an ideology in stone, the 'civisme républicain' of Antoine Prost's *monuments aux morts*, for instance, is to write a strangely incomplete account of what remembrance means to those who remember.¹⁴ It is to privilege the public purpose of a commemorative speech or statue over the private experience of remembrance; to prioritise a politician's agenda over the emotional needs and social responsibilities of the individuals, families and communities that honour, but also grieve for, their dead. Indeed, to write of remembrance in this way seems indefensible in the light of Jay Winter's pioneering work on the remembrance of the Great War dead.¹⁵ Rather, as Winter's work makes clear, commemoration can be a political statement, a social act, and a profoundly personal experience at one and the same time. Unlike any other form of civic ceremonial, it unites the public and the private in a unique combination of celebration and sorrow, and its memorials are both 'sites of memory' and 'sites of mourning'. To take only the examples with which we began, the grief of Dusson's 'inconsolable' fiancée and the 'larmes' that flowed during Blanc's requiem cannot easily be accommodated within the flamboyantly statist sweep of Nora's *lieux de mémoire*, or even reconciled with Troyansky's more mundane 'monuments to nationalism'.¹⁶

¹⁴ Bonnet, *Naissance du Panthéon*, p. 80; A. Prost, 'Les monuments aux morts: culte républicain? Culte civique? Culte patriotique?', in Nora, ed. *Les Lieux de mémoire*, vol. 1, *La République* (Paris, 1984), pp. 195–225 (p. 214).

¹⁵ J. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge, 1995).

¹⁶ D. G. Troyansky, 'Monumental Politics: National History and Local Memory in French *Monuments aux Morts* in the Department of the Aisne since 1870', *FHS* 15 (1987), pp. 121–41 (p. 133).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87850-0 - Commemorating the Dead in Revolutionary France: Revolution and Remembrance, 1789-1799

Joseph Clarke

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 Commemorating the dead in Revolutionary France

Emotions, regret, respect, sorrow and a sense of loss, and the individuals who experience them, have, more often than not, been absent from studies of what the remembrance of the dead means to those they leave behind.¹⁷ This is perhaps understandable. Political historians have, as a rule, preferred the firm and reassuringly familiar ground of ideological engagement to the shifting sands of individual emotion. However, what is understandable when analysing the everyday attributes of a political culture seems rather less excusable when discussing the place the dead occupy within that culture, and historians of the 1790s have hardly been less culpable in this respect. For all the attention lavished on Revolutionary culture in recent years, genuine human emotions, as distinct from the fashionable effusions of sentimental literature or the well-planned pathos of David's pageantry, have received scant attention, and neither the sobs that saturate Vincent-Buffault's *Histoire des larmes* nor the fictional fathers and sons that populate Lynn Hunt's 'family romance' seem any substitute for real tears shed by real families.¹⁸ There have, of course, been honourable exceptions to this neglect, and Richard Cobb did more than most to put individuals, their passions and their private lives, back into Revolutionary politics; but his interest in individuals and concern for the complexity of the communities to which they belonged has rather fallen from favour in recent writings about the Revolution. Nevertheless, Cobb's contention that 'the borders between private life and political militancy' remained blurred throughout the Revolution cannot, and should not, be ignored.¹⁹ To overlook this point, to pretend that the remembrance of the dead is a purely political matter, would be, as Claude Langlois has warned in another context, to write 'a history without', a history without nuance or variegation, but above all, without real people.²⁰

For the most part, the history of collective memory in modern France has also been a history without religious beliefs or rituals. Certainly, Jay Winter and Annette Becker have highlighted the rôle religion played in mediating the grief of those who mourned the dead of the Great War, while Jean-Clément Martin's research on the Vendée and Michel Lagrée's catalogue of Brittany's 'tombe de mémoire' illustrate the complex web of religious customs that have

¹⁷ The relationship between mourning and memory has been largely overlooked in most of these studies; occasionally, this absence is rendered explicit. For Ben-Amos, for example, mourning appears to have played no part in Republican commemorations until after the First World War, when the presence of the Unknown Soldier under the Arc de Triomphe 'added a mournful character to the virtuous, patriotic monument': Ben-Amos, *Funerals*, p. 224.

¹⁸ A. Vincent-Buffault, *Histoire des larmes, XVIIIe–XIXe siècles* (Paris, 1986); L. Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley, 1992).

¹⁹ R. Cobb, 'The French Revolution and Private Life', in T. D. Williams, ed., *Historical Studies VIII: Papers Read before the Irish Conference of Historians, 29–30 May 1969* (Dublin, 1971), pp. 3–30 (p. 16).

²⁰ C. Langlois, 'Furet's Revolution', *FHS* 16 (1990), pp. 766–76 (p. 770).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87850-0 - Commemorating the Dead in Revolutionary France: Revolution and Remembrance, 1789-1799

Joseph Clarke

Excerpt

[More information](#)

characterised the commemoration of the Counter-Revolution's dead since the Revolution.²¹ However, the sensitivity these scholars have brought to the study of twentieth-century and Counter-Revolutionary memory is, unfortunately, all too rare. On the contrary, the wide range of spiritual devotions and social duties that concern the dead in popular religious culture scarcely feature across most of this literature, preoccupied as it is with what Bonnet has described as the steady 'laïcisation de la mémoire' in modern France.²² One looks in vain, for example, for a reference to religious icons in Agulhon's 'statuomanie' except in routine opposition to the emblems of the Republican tradition; and the handful of articles that touch on this subject in Nora's multi-volume *Lieux de mémoire* merely confirm the overwhelming impression of neglect. Indeed, for Ben-Amos, religion, like mourning, appears to be all but irrelevant, and his discussion of the Third Republic's commemoration of one of its *grands hommes* concludes that 'even if he was a Catholic, the religious aspect of the event was unimportant'.²³ Even if this is true of the nineteenth century – and that in itself seems problematic – can the same really be said of the men and women who packed the church of Saint-Séverin and the cathedral of Saint-Jean to pay their respects to Dusson and Blanc in July 1789? Can their presence in a church, for a funeral mass, be discounted quite so readily; can their prayers for the repose of the souls of the men they mourned be so casually dismissed in the name of a later *laïcité*?

Of course, it might be objected that this same *laïcité* had its roots in the Revolutionary decade, or that these unceasing commemorations are merely another manifestation of the Revolution's monotonously single-minded recourse to ritual to sacralise the new régime.²⁴ Perhaps so, but would the Parisians who attended Dusson's funeral have ever understood that they were engaged in the first instance of a sweeping transfer of sacrality? Would this term have meant any more to those who honoured Mirabeau in 1791, or the Republic's war dead two years later? Alain Bourreau's warning, 'bien souvent l'historien sacralise ce qu'il a renoncé à expliquer', springs to mind.²⁵ And if we are to explain what remembering the dead meant to these men and women, then Gabriel Le Bras's conclusion that 'la pratique [religieuse] ne fut jamais

²¹ Winter, *Sites of Memory*; A. Becker, *La Guerre et la foi: de la mort à la mémoire 1914–1930* (Paris, 1994); J.-C. Martin, *La Vendée de la mémoire: 1800–1980* (Paris, 1989); and M. Lagrée and J. Roche, *Tombeaux de mémoire: la dévotion populaire aux victimes de la Révolution dans l'Ouest* (Rennes, 1993).

²² J.-C. Bonnet, 'Naissance du Panthéon', *Poétique* 33 (1978), pp. 46–65 (p. 50).

²³ Ben-Amos, *Funerals, Politics and Memory*, p. 280.

²⁴ M. Ozouf, *La Fête révolutionnaire* (Paris, 1973).

²⁵ A. Bourreau, *Le Simple Corps du Roi: l'impossible sacralité des souverains français, XVe–XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1988), p. 41.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87850-0 - Commemorating the Dead in Revolutionary France: Revolution and Remembrance, 1789-1799

Joseph Clarke

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 Commemorating the dead in Revolutionary France

plus générale que de 1650 à 1789' must be our starting point.²⁶ Even after fifty years, and after Michel Vovelle's statistical survey of the dechristianisation of death in *ancien régime* Provence and Philippe Ariès's rather more impressionistic suggestion that the 'culte des morts' was somehow the prerogative of the post-Revolutionary generation, Le Bras's insight remains fundamental to any understanding of the customs and ceremonies that enveloped the dead in eighteenth-century France.²⁷ Indeed, in a century when this routine, even unthinking, religious practice remained the rule for the overwhelming majority, and when the rites relating to death generally proved the most resistant to the onset of secularising change, the connection between customary religious culture and the commemoration of the dead is impossible to ignore. Inevitably, therefore, the complex, at first collaborative but later conflictual, relationship between popular religious culture, Revolutionary politics and the remembrance of the dead is central to this study. By placing this troubled relationship centre stage, this book examines how religious rituals and assumptions defined the Revolution's rites of memory throughout its early years, but also explores how those customary beliefs continued to shape Revolutionary remembrance even after their ritual expression had been effectively proscribed during the Terror and severely curtailed thereafter. In a sense, then, this is a history of revolutionary change; but it is also an attempt to understand the limits of cultural change in a time of revolution.

The commemoration of the dead raises many difficult questions, and in order to answer them, this study has adopted a broadly chronological approach. In part, such a structure offers the simplest means of charting how and why commemoration changed through the 1790s. However, this choice also corresponds to a number of wider concerns. The forms commemoration took, and the men – they are almost always men – that the Revolutionaries chose to commemorate, are simply too diverse to categorise under any distinct thematic headings. No common denominator can connect Dusson, Blanc, Voltaire and Hoche other than their deaths, and the decision of others to honour them. For this reason a chronological discussion seems preferable, if only because any attempt to impose a more thematic structure on the Revolution's rites of memory would create distinctions, between (for example), the rhetoric and ritual of remembrance or between the commemoration of the politician and the

²⁶ G. Le Bras, *Etudes de Sociologie Religieuse*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1955), vol. i, p. 275. See also John McManners's magisterial *Death and the Enlightenment: Changing Attitudes to Death among Christians and Unbelievers in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford, 1985).

²⁷ M. Vovelle, *Piété baroque et déchristianisation en Provence au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1978 edn). See also P. Chaunu, *La Mort à Paris, 16^e, 17^e et 18^e siècles* (Paris, 1978). For Ariès, the establishment of Père Lachaise in 1804 constitutes 'une sorte d'acte de fondation d'un culte nouveau, le culte des morts': P. Ariès, *L'Homme devant la mort*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1977 edn), vol. ii, p. 226.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87850-0 - Commemorating the Dead in Revolutionary France: Revolution and Remembrance, 1789-1799

Joseph Clarke

Excerpt

[More information](#)

philosophe, where none existed in practice. To adopt such a schema, would, more importantly, be to overlook the continuity of concerns that drove Revolutionaries to honour their dead, and the sheer contingency of the choices they made concerning whom to commemorate and how. From the unexpected death or assassination to the casualties that followed the outbreak of another *journée*, these choices were rarely premeditated, but instead were reactions to ever-changing circumstances. Only a chronological structure can really make sense of how those choices were made and what aims they served.

Accordingly, Chapter 1 opens the discussion by introducing the commemorative legacy of the *ancien régime* and some of the historiographical issues that legacy raises. Chapter 2 then examines the Revolution's earliest rites of remembrance, the requiem masses that began in July 1789 and the plans for commemorative paintings and monuments that appeared soon after, in order to explore the social and emotional needs expressed by the Revolution's rites of memory and the political tensions they created from the very first. Chapter 3 moves on to consider the establishment of the Revolutionary Panthéon in 1791, the ceremonies that accompanied its creation and the controversies they provoked, both in Paris and the provinces. Chapter 4 returns to the Panthéon to trace its evolution under the direction of Quatremère de Quincy and to chart how the commemoration of the Revolution's dead changed between the summer of 1791 and the onset of the Terror. Chapter 5 takes this theme of change on into *an II* to investigate the rupture with the rites of the past that the Terror entailed, while also exploring the continuities, and the confusion, that characterised commemoration during the Revolution's most radical phase. Chapter 6 takes the story on from Thermidor to the Consulate in order to assess the political problems posed by commemoration after the Terror and chart the impact of war upon the remembrance of the Revolution's dead.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87850-0 - Commemorating the Dead in Revolutionary France: Revolution and Remembrance, 1789-1799

Joseph Clarke

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1 Virtue in action

In April 1791, the National Assembly established the Panthéon Français to receive Mirabeau's remains. Voltaire was admitted soon after, and the Panthéon quickly began to assume its modern shape: some men of letters, more politicians, a handful of scientists and technocrats. A prestigious gentleman's club for the Revolution's illustrious dead: no women need apply. Few events seem as characteristic of the course of the Enlightened eighteenth century; even more promisingly, the Assembly's decision seems, almost despite itself, to anticipate the Church–State conflict that would define French politics for over a century to come. Deconsecrated and reconsecrated with each passing régime, the Panthéon changed hands no fewer than five times between 1791 and 1885. Even then, it took the death of another colossus, Victor Hugo, and about two million mourners to finally establish the Republic's sovereignty over what Hugo had long before dismissed as 'le plus beau gâteau de Savoie qu'on ait jamais fait en pierre'.¹ Perched decorously upon the Mont Sainte-Geneviève, the Panthéon was nineteenth-century France's political weather-vane *par excellence*; but for Owen Chadwick its significance is even greater than this, and its tortuous history stands as 'a symbol of all our troubled intellectual history', an embodiment of an all-encompassing secularisation of the European mind.²

It is a heavy burden for one building to bear, but as France's realms of memory have come under ever more detailed examination, so historians have looked to the Panthéon to create a coherent narrative of Republican 'collective memory' stretching back to the Revolution, and beyond that to the *ancien régime*. And just as the radical luminaries of the 1880s summoned up the shades of Voltaire and Rousseau to justify Sainte-Geneviève's return to the Republican fold, so historians have naturally sought out continuities in the history of this Republican shrine. It is an obvious temptation; but as a result, the meaning of remembrance in eighteenth-century France has largely been

¹ V. Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris* (Paris, 1967 edn), p. 157.

² O. Chadwick, *The Secularisation of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1975), p. 159.