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Claude-Pierre Molard (1759–1837): Un technicien dans la cité ed. by Liliane Hilaire-Pérez and François Jarrige (review)

Claudine Fontanon

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Review

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

Claudine Fontanon (bio)

***Claude-Pierre Molard (1759–1837): Un technicien dans la cité* Edited by Liliane Hilaire-Pérez and François Jarrige. Besançon: Presses universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2023. Pp. 318.**

The goal of the editors of this volume on the technician Claude-Pierre Molard is to bring to light—or even to rehabilitate—a person historians consider to be of secondary importance. To meet the challenge, the foremost specialists on the period were invited to a colloquium held in the province from which Molard originated, Franche-Comté. The resulting book is structured in four

parts, covering the different stages of his career, from the social origins of his family to the institutions, both permanent and short lived, where he worked (Académie des sciences, Ecoles d'arts et métiers, Société d'encouragement pour l'industrie nationale, Conservatoire national des arts et métiers).

Molard appears as an important actor in the sphere of technology from the preindustrial era to the beginnings of industrialization in France in the mid-1820s. At the heart of this period of transformation—of both the structures of industrial production and the process of technological improvements and innovations—Molard played an important role through his academic expertise, his own production of technical objects, and his actions to promote French technology against English competition, which was closely scrutinized by the technical elites, as evidenced by the vogue for travel to Great Britain at the end of the Napoleonic era. The trip of his brother, known as Molard jeune, illustrates this interest in the products of English industry, **[End Page 965]** which cannot yet be described as industrialist. Another example is Charles Dupin, a polytechnician and marine engineer, who brought back from his travels to England another kind of innovation, a new form of education: the Mechanics' Institutes, which offered free courses in mechanics to industrial workers. Seduced by the modernity of this teaching, in 1819 Dupin used it as an argument to obtain from the government the creation of three chairs of applied sciences at the Conservatoire des arts et métiers, including one in mechanics applied to the arts, which he reserved for himself. This created a form of teaching that broke with the more traditional form of transmission of technical knowledge by demonstration, which was at the origin of the Conservatoire. The English historian Robert Fox has analyzed the debate between traditionalists and progressives carried on at the time within French institutions for technical education. Molard, who was considered a traditionalist and was at that time director of the Conservatoire, was directly affected by this pedagogical revolution, which was promoted by a generation of polytechnicians who launched courses for workers, such as Charles Dupin in several maritime ports or Jean Victor Poncelet in Metz in the 1820s. Of this revolution, which came to define the identity of the Conservatoire, historians have only analyzed the period of the teaching of applied sciences after 1819, omitting the twenty-five years when talented technicians such as Gérard Christian, Molard's successor as director of the Conservatoire, followed the encyclopedic trend that had led to its foundation in 1794.

One earlier study did unearth the past of Molard, that of Dominique de

Place, archivist and documentalist of the Centre français d'histoire des techniques at the Conservatoire national des arts et métiers, in her research report entitled *L'incitation au progrès technique et industriel en France de 1783 à 1819 d'après les archives du Conservatoire des arts et métiers (1780–1830)* (EHSS, 1981). The book under review is dedicated to her.

The authors of this edited volume thus aim at highlighting an actor considered by historians to be of lesser importance and whose actions in the technical field were overshadowed by the rising figures of technology, the polytechnicians, who had the already great prestige of the Monge school, even if—like the academicians—they quickly turned their backs on technology in order to pursue science. This work, based on an impressive corpus of archives and printed...

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to many works devoted to war fleets, the author endeavors to decipher the modernization of the British fleet within the framework of a global and related approach, attentive to the adaptation of technical solutions to the British context. This approach makes it possible to measure the social and political interactions in the adoption of a new armament and comes as a counterpoint to several technical chapters that draw on naval engineering concepts. Finally, it is regrettable that the author does not extend his story beyond 1870, because the sinking of the HMS *Captain* does not conclude the story of the naval arms race during this period, which lasted nearly twenty years concerning battleships.

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