

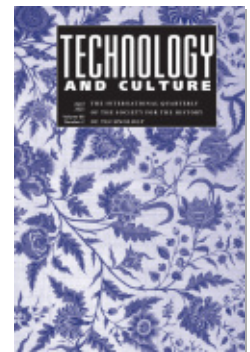


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Léon Lalanne: Un ingénieur entre la science, la politique et l'industrie au XIXe siècle [Léon Lalanne: An engineer between science, politics and industry in the nineteenth century] ed. by François Jarrige (review)

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(Review)



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Léon Lalanne: Un ingénieur entre la science, la politique et l'industrie au XIXe siècle [Léon Lalanne: An engineer between science, politics and industry in the nineteenth century]

Edited by François Jarrige. Toulouse: Presses universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2024. Pp. 284.

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This book, edited by François Jarrige, is a multifocal biography of French engineer Léon Lalanne (1811–92). It is part of the series *Les cahiers de la MSHE Ledoux*, to which Jarrige already contributed the edited work *Dompter Prométhée* (2016), which explores the links between technological change, industrialization, and reformist thinking in nineteenth-century France. This new book builds on Jarrige's previous line of investigation, focusing this time on an individual.

While Léon Lalanne held a leading position a few months after the 1848 Revolution and took part in some of the most decisive events in French political history, his career was largely unknown and his role at the time subject to debate. Jarrige took advantage of the discovery of the Lalanne family archives, now housed at the École Nationale des Ponts et Chaussées, to ask several historians to write about each facet of the activities of this *polytechnicien*, a member of the Corps des Ponts et Chaussées, who later in life became a notable figure in the Third Republic, was elected to the Académie des Sciences as an independent member (1879), awarded the Cross of Grand Officer of the Légion d'Honneur (1881), and finally elected senator for life (1883).

Together, these eleven papers, of very different length, retrace Lalanne's professional, scholarly, and political career. The most convincing of these papers refer to the newly available archives. The book is organized chronologically in three sections. The first looks at Lalanne's youth, education, and early work. It analyzes, in turn, his family ties and early friendships formed during his school years (J. A. Lathoud); his mathematical training (J. Dhombres); the circumstances in which he wrote his *Essai philosophique sur la technologie* in 1840 (L. Hilaire-Pérez); and his railway experiences, both for government railways and the private sector (G. Ribeill). The second section focuses on the decisive 1840s. It examines his efforts to educate the wider public through teaching and publishing (C. Christen) and sheds light on his unsuccessful bid for election to the Constituent Assembly in spring 1848 (C. Voilliot). Next, his activities as head of the Ateliers Nationaux—set up by the provisional government on February 27, 1848, to bring to life the “right to work” established by the new Second Republic—are examined in a new light, emphasizing his ambiguous role. Less than a month after his arrival as director, he was unable to prevent the closure of the Ateliers, which prompted the June 1848 insurrection and violent police repression (F. Jarrige). The final section looks at Lalanne's overseas assignments under the

Second Empire—highlighting the loyal team that accompanied him in his railway successes (J.-P. Passaqui) and emphasizing the political dimension (G. Leanca)—then focuses on the devices he invented throughout his life to shorten tedious calculations (K. Chatzis and A. Lacour), and finally looks at his work as a technical expert in the Senate (G. Carnino).

The main merit of this book lies in its approach, which opens up the history of engineers to encompass the various contexts in which these men were working. In particular, it clearly addresses the often-neglected political dimensions of their activities. Apart from the unresolved mystery surrounding Lalanne's true intentions or how naive he was when he agreed to run the Ateliers Nationaux, it is still difficult to grasp the strength of his dedication to the republican cause. In this respect, I can only note that, despite a succession of half successes and real failures, he was promoted by successive political regimes, the Second Empire even granting him the lofty rank of Inspector General. When the Republicans appointed him director of the École Nationale des Ponts et Chaussées, his corporatist reflexes prevailed over any other consideration. Moreover, while this book offers a welcome range of perspectives, the juxtaposition of insights seems to detract from an understanding not only of the common threads in the various facets of his character but also of his ambivalences and contradictions. On a practical level, the appendix unfortunately does not contain a chronology of the events in his career. Nonetheless, this book is an original contribution to the history of French government engineers in the nineteenth century and a useful complement to Patrick Harismendy's biography of Sadi Carnot (1995).

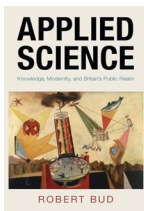
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Applied Science: Knowledge, Modernity, and Britain's Public Realm

By Robert Bud. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024. Pp. 342.



Science and technology are global, and so are the concepts that we use to understand them. Yet as Robert Bud demonstrates in his definitive study of “applied science” in Britain, these concepts take their meaning from specific linguistic contexts, defined by language, nation, discipline, region, and institution. Bud’s artfully constructed monograph provides a model for scholarship in the conceptual history of scientific