

# LA SURVIVANCE DE MICHELET

## HISTORIOGRAPHIE ET POLITIQUE EN FRANCE DEPUIS 1870

### ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

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## Summary

### **The afterlife of Michelet. Historiography and politics in France from 1870 onwards**

On 13 July 1898, the Panthéon in Paris served as a stage for the official national commemoration of the centenary of the birth of the French historian Jules Michelet (1798-1874). A week and a half later, the public part of the festivities followed: a historical parade and an impressive musical show. With this centenary, Michelet's status as the canonical national historian reached its culmination. More than a century has passed since then and Michelet is still present in French collective memory. A new complete pocket edition of his seventeen-volume *Histoire de France* was published in 2008 and politicians from across almost the entire political spectrum occasionally invoke him in their speeches. Meanwhile, for French historians he remains a classic author, even if his work can no longer be considered exemplary. This dissertation discusses Michelet's canonization in the French collective memory. In addition, it offers an insight into the role played by national history in French political culture since the nineteenth century, and the dynamics between professional history writing and the political uses of history.

How did a historian from the nineteenth century acquire so prominent a place in the collective memory that his ideas on national history remain influential to this day? Why, in which ways and with what aims did different groups or persons appropriate Michelet's work? Which transformations did his 'intellectual' or 'symbolical heritage' undergo? In this dissertation, Michelet's afterlife in French historiography and political culture is explored, paying particular attention to the moments in which these two domains were entangled. In a first, preliminary chapter, Michelet's life and work are examined, and especially the ways in which he shaped his own image and the memories of himself that he handed down to his intellectual heirs. The actual research begins with the 1870s,

when Michelet himself deceased, the Third French Republic was established and history writing became an academic discipline. Chronologically, it extends to approximately the seventies of the twentieth century, when Michelet's reception increasingly became an affair of professional literary scholars and lost most of its political dimension.

An important assumption underlying this research is the idea that the canonicity of an author is dynamic and cannot be entirely explained by the inherent properties of either the author or his work. Canonicity consists of the creative manipulation and appropriation of a work in diverse contexts. Hence, both the 'monumentality' of a work and the possibilities that it offers for multiple interpretations and claims are a precondition for obtaining this status. Michelet's voluminous and varied oeuvre carries such a high degree of flexibility that politicians and ideologues of different republican tendencies have been able to appropriate it, from the moderate 'opportunists' and the more leftist 'radicals' to the right-wing nationalist Maurice Barrès and the socialist Jean Jaurès. This thesis provides an overview of these appropriations, including the various interpretations of and selections from the work of Michelet that served to support them. Thus, also the limits to the malleability of Michelet's work become clear: royalists and internationalist socialists proved to have no use for the republican national historian, and hence they often expressed their criticism of the political regime as an attack on Michelet's political and historiographical principles.

In the course of this research, several 'guardians' of Michelet's memory are identified; people who dedicated themselves to cultivating and maintaining the collective remembrance of Michelet, which was necessary for its preservation to be ensured. These 'guardians' comprise those who published editions of his work, organized commemorations and lobbied for Michelet's inclusion in the school curriculum. The first and foremost among them is his widow Athénaïs Michelet, who during the twenty-five years that she outlived him published numerous new editions and popularizations of his work, and who constantly brought his oeuvre to the attention of politicians and policymakers. She therefore was later often vilified as an 'abusive widow'. This research, however, shows that she was of crucial significance for Michelet's canonization.

In this dissertation, three historical specialisms or approaches are combined: the history of historiography; the study of collective or cultural memory and of identity formation; the history of the political and political culture. The first two approaches are initially adopted independently of each other, but the extent to which Michelet's historiographical and public reception became interwoven over time makes it eventually necessary to study these together. The third approach concerns the history of how people organize their society politically and provided it with meaning through symbolism and ideology. This approach underpins the entire dissertation and, by tying together the two other perspec-

tives, makes it possible to explain Michelet's dual canonization in the historical discipline and the public domain. French political culture appears to be in fact inextricably bound up with the reflection on the national past, so much so that political conflicts are often manifested as historiographical disputes. In France, more than elsewhere, history plays an important role in the public domain. A consequence of this is that French professional history writing expressly has a social mission, in spite of the avowed ideal of scientific neutrality and objectivity. Hence, the regime of the Third Republic attached great value to the canonization of a national historian, while historians actively contributed to this public canonization without considering their engagement in contradiction with their ideal of impartiality.

Historiography is a specific strand within the history of science that traces the genesis of the professional, academic discipline of history writing. Here it is studied through the prism of Michelet's reception in this academic discipline. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, and especially from the 1870s onwards, the study and writing of history became an academic discipline in France, with its own methods and journals, and its own professional identity. This professional identity was supported by a discipline history, a legitimizing history of the genesis and development of the discipline in which Michelet was designated as its 'father'. This is mainly attributed to the efforts of Gabriel Monod, the founder of the first French historical journal, who considered Michelet his own intellectual mentor and put him forward as the great ancestor of the discipline as a whole. After Monod, his student Lucien Febvre took over his role. Although he was in strong opposition with the generation before him and therefore counts as the initiator of a new paradigm, he adopted Monod's version of the discipline history and its corresponding father figure. Furthermore, both Monod and Febvre also promoted Michelet as a moral and political example in times of crisis. Thus, one of the conclusions of this thesis is that the distinction that is traditionally made in French historiography between three successive schools – the romantic one led by Michelet, the 'positivist' one established by Monod and Febvre's *Annales* school – should be put into perspective. This first of all applies when looking at the construction of a disciplinary identity, but upon further consideration also seems to be the case at an epistemological level.

The second part of this research concerns French national cultural memory. In order to study this phenomenon, several concepts are used that have recently been developed in the interdisciplinary field of cultural memory studies. The regime of the Third Republic pursued a large-scale educational policy aimed at turning the French population into national republican citizens. For the formulation of the national and republican ideology that it propagated through education, commemorations and national celebrations, and – using statues and street names – in the public space, the regime partly reverted to a repertoire of

national symbols that was lodged in the collective memory since the French Revolution. Meanwhile, the regime canonized Michelet as the author of the national and republican historical narrative and as France's national historian. He, too, was for this reason given street names, statues and commemorations.

The benchmarks of this public canonization and posthumous political appropriation of Michelet are a number of major commemorations. The first of these was his funeral at the Parisian graveyard Père-Lachaise in 1876, which was attended by several republican politicians and journalists and some 20,000 interested. Six years later followed a well-attended gathering at the occasion of the unveiling of his monumental tomb, for which money was raised among hundreds of private donors and tens of French municipalities. In 1898, finally, the centenary of his birth was celebrated with a national commemoration on the eve of the annual national holiday of 14 July. This last and exceptionally large-scale commemoration should be understood against the backdrop of the Dreyfus Affair, which politically divided the country. The regime hoped that through this national commemoration it would radiate unity while at the same time it associated Michelet with its moderate republicanism.

After this commemoration, several new critics of the regime, from both the left and the right, began to reject Michelet. These criticisms, as well as changes in the political and historiographical constellation, caused a gradual decline in Michelet's public canonicity after 1898. Instead of major public commemorations, only smaller commemorations and jubilee conferences of Michelet specialists are organized after that date. Meanwhile, in the twentieth century, *Annales* historians and later those of the 'nouvelle histoire' still regard Michelet as a forefather, although references to his work become more and more limited. The recent 2008 republication, however, shows that Michelet remains a canonical author who can be made topical anew whenever the context so demands. By revealing the processes that led to Michelet's canonical status, this research contributes to a better understanding of the ways in which the national past partakes in today's French political culture.