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COMMEMORATING JULES MICHELET, 1876, 1882, 1898: THE PRODUCTIVITY OF BANALITY

CAMILLE CREYGHTON *

Abstract — Between 1870 and 1900 three commemorative events for Jules Michelet took place in France: his burial at the Père Lachaise cemetery in 1876, the unveiling of his monument in 1882 and the national commemoration of his centenary in 1898. The republican historian was thus a major figure in Third Republic memory culture, while he was also considered one of its sources of inspiration. This article examines how throughout successive commemorations Michelet’s legacy was appropriated and popularized by the regime and how this resulted in what can be called a ‘banalizing of memory’. Furthermore, it argues that this banalizing process, despite criticism based on Michelet’s own work, was productive and led to an expansion of the public’s awareness of Michelet. Rather than being a sign of declining memory, banality in some contexts was the most viable option for realizing the aims of a commemoration.

In a circular to the rectors of the Université de France, the Ministre de l’Instruction publique, Alfred Rambaud, announced in the following words a national commemoration of the historian Jules Michelet (1798–1874), to be held on 13 July 1898: ‘France has to be associated entirely with the honours brought to Michelet […] Michelet was not only a great writer and a great historian. He lived the life of this France. ... He loved the fatherland both throughout its misfortunes and afflictions, and throughout its glories and triumphs.’¹ In the midst of the Dreyfus Affair, which profoundly divided public opinion and the political leaders in France, parliament approved by large majority the plans for the organization of this national commemoration—one of the few commemorations for individual persons in Third Republic France to be officially endorsed.

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by the government and the only one allowed such a clear connection with the national holiday of 14 July.2

This need to commemorate Michelet was not only felt in 1898, as this was already the third major commemorative event for Michelet since his death in 1874.3 Moreover, Michelet was honoured with street names in numerous French towns and villages, and schools were called after him, most notably the Lycée Michelet in Vanves, formerly Lycée du Prince Impérial. His work was reprinted in a plethora of editions aimed at various audiences, from luxury multivolume series to cheap illustrated editions on low-quality paper that were sold like a popular feuilleton in instalments. Abridged and simplified versions were widely read at all school levels, and fragments of his work served as dictation exercises. In 1915 the correction sheet for the exercise ‘to mention two important French writers and scientists’ in a primary school manual prescribed without further explanation the answer ‘Hugo and Michelet; Pasteur and Berthelot’.4 Even a warship was named after Michelet in 1905.

Although none of his commemorations matched, in terms of spontaneous popular support, the burial of Victor Hugo, which counts as the largest public manifestation in France of the time, Michelet can be considered one of the major figures in French memory culture.5 The official devotion to Michelet is illustrated by the fact that, on the occasion of the 1889 revolutionary centenary, the single contribution of the national government to the organization of the festivities was to command a new luxury edition of his Histoire de la Révolution française, thus expressing that his interpretation apparently was leading for the regime.6

The richness of the commemorative expressions associated with Michelet enables the study of his remembrance throughout the whole period spanning his death in 1874 and the turn of the century. Since the article genre leaves no space for extensively discussing all features of Michelet’s public commemoration in this period, the present text will focus on the three major commemorative events: his

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2 O. Ihl, La Fête républicaine (Paris, 1996), 314. This reluctance by Third Republic governments to celebrate individuals apart from pantheonizations was not shared by the wider public. On the contrary, in popular culture an entire cult for national heroes was developed: V. Datta, Heroes and Legends of Fin-de-siècle France: Gender, Politics, and National Identity (Cambridge, 2011). The official reluctance, in particular for commemorating individual ‘great men’ in connection to the 14 July, which had to celebrate the entire people, can be explained by what Jacques Neefs has described as the paradoxical ‘hatred for great men’ within this age of celebration of great individuals that has to do with the inherent egalitarian tendency of democratic republicanism: J. Neefs, ‘La “haine des grands hommes” au XIXe siècle’, MLN, 116 (2001), 750–69. Also: R. Dalisson, Célébrer la Nation: Les Fêtes nationales en France de 1789 à nos jours (Paris, 2009), 255.

3 While three major public commemorative events in just over twenty years for one person is a lot, the proliferation of this type of commemorations was of course not unique to Michelet. Nor was it an exclusively French phenomenon, but a transnational trend related to broader historical circumstances such as modernization, the development of nationalism and of metropolitan cultures: R. Quinault, ‘The cult of the centenary, c.1784–1914’, Historical Research, 71 (1998), 303–23; J. Leeressen and A. Rigney (eds), Commemorating Writers in Nineteenth-Century Europe: Nation-Building and Centenary Fever (Basingstoke, 2014).


public burial at Père Lachaise on 18 May 1876, more than two years after his death; the 1882 unveiling of his tomb; and the centenary of his birth in 1898. Such a diachronic study reveals the conjuncture of remembrance in relation to the political context of the moment. While each time the same personality is the subject of the commemoration, what is commemorated in practice, by means of which rituals and symbols and by whom, can vary largely over time.

In her recent work on the commemoration of Walter Scott, Ann Rigney offers a useful conceptual apparatus for understanding this variation. According to Rigney, it is the combination of the ‘monumentality’ and ‘malleability’ of a (literary) oeuvre that enables a work to become canonical and hence a culture of remembrance to come into existence for its author. While ‘monumentality’ makes a writer worth commemorating in the first place, it is the ‘malleability’ of a work, the fact that it can be read in different ways and appropriated or adapted in different contexts and media, that enables a work to remain topical long after it has been written. Thus, a work can appeal to a public with needs and ideas that were not or even could not be imagined by the author, while other aspects can be overlooked by that public.

Michelet’s work offered ample opportunities for appropriation by the newly established republican regime, which had to win the hearts and minds of the people in the 1870s. His *Histoire de France* and *Histoire de la Révolution française* are both sweeping stories that present French history as an ongoing path towards liberation through revolution and the republic as the logical outcome of this revolution. In line with his historical ideas, he had been a leading voice before and during the 1848 Revolution, protesting vehemently against clerical influence in society, and he acted as a mentor for many republican opposition leaders during the Second Empire. History writing and political action were closely tied together for him, because he conceived his historical work as a means of reconciling the French nation with itself by revealing the past from which it was the outcome and thereby indicating the future to which it had to aspire. Hence, he aimed to contribute to the construction of a French republican national identity with the memory of the great Revolution as the cornerstone. In his *Le Peuple* of 1846 and again in *Nos Fils* of 1869, he stressed the importance of moral education for creating a sense of citizenship and a national unity—another line of thought that republican leaders could use as a legitimization of their political-pedagogical programme. On the other hand, his anti-clericalism was shared by many republican leaders, but his spiritualism was not easily reconcilable with their positivism.

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7 C. Creyghton, *La Survivance de Michelet: Historiographie et politique en France depuis 1870* (Paris, forthcoming 2019) analyses Michelet’s remembrance and appropriation in professional historiography and political culture, as well as the interplay between these domains.


Two related features of Michelet’s work seemed especially useful but were nonetheless difficult to instrumentalize. First was the absolutely central but also ambivalent concept of ‘le peuple’, which was at the root of the polysemy of his work and enabled its malleability.10 Second, and following from that, was his stress on the importance of national and popular festivals as expressions of national identity, means to national reconciliation and as political and educational manifestations. Michelet identified the people and their collective action as the driving force of history, thus confirming the republican trust in the people’s political agency. Therefore, commemorating Michelet was always commemorating the national past too and hence the nation itself. But who the ‘people’ were was less straightforward to understand and could be interpreted in various ways in different political contexts.

The concept in any case referred to a unity not divided by class, or ethnic and regional origin. As such, it could have the political meaning of the *demos*, the (democratic) people that defined France as a nation and political entity and that transcended all factual political divisions. Its unity was spiritual and remained unconscious until the people’s revolutionary awakening at the end of a centuries-long history of slow but steady self-liberation. Hence, ‘people’ was not only a political entity but also, in Bettina Lerner’s words who follows here Roland Barthes, a ‘myth’, a unity vested in nature and represented in folk traditions.11 In addition, the concept also functioned as a sociological category in Michelet’s work, encompassing the classes who until the French Revolution had no say in politics but who seized power in making the Revolution. In that way ‘people’ came to mean the lower classes or even the poor, those whom radical or socialist politicians argued were in fact still excluded—economically and therefore also politically—in the Third Republic.

While the myth of the people had come to life in the Revolution, Michelet described civil festivals as occasions to revive it. In the last chapter of his pedagogical book *Nos Fils*, entitled ‘education by the means of feasts’, Michelet argued that civil festivals should take the place of religious ceremonies as the occasions when moral and civic education culminates in a lived experience of fraternity.12 At spontaneous and self-organizing gatherings, the people discover their unity and their political power; hence, they become a true nation: ‘The people will make themselves through festivals.’13 Festivals, then, function in the same manner as the Revolution itself had done: they are moments of collective action, originating from a collective action

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unconsciousness of which great individuals were only the spokesmen or more precisely the ‘génies’. Therefore, a truly popular festival, according to Michelet, had to be a spontaneous one, just as spontaneous as the storming of the Bastille had been. It had to spring from the collective will of the people that organized, as it were, themselves in an organic manner. For this, the Fête de la fédération of 1790 provided the archetype, but in Michelet’s eyes such a festival was never truly realized again.

The idea that public festivities and commemorations were a crucial aspect of republican civic education was taken over by leading republicans in the 1870s. For instance, Michelet’s account of the Fête de la fédération served as an argument in the debates on the establishment of an annual celebration of 14 July as a national holiday. Logically, the commemorations for Michelet too were evaluated by Michelet’s sympathizers with the criteria he had provided. This, however, led to predictable disappointment: the requirement of spontaneity, for instance, proved difficult to reconcile with the planned festivals of an established republic. In addition, the polysemy of the concept of ‘people’ enabled both bourgeois republicans of the 1880s and 1890s and their radical or socialist opponents to appropriate Michelet. While they at times sought to deny each other the right to commemorate Michelet, the result of this malleability appeared to be more surprising in the long run.

In the abundant historiography about collective memory in the political culture of the Third Republic, two interpretative strands are discernible. The first is represented mostly by Pierre Nora and Maurice Agulhon and stresses the eventual unifying power of commemorations, friction and political discord notwithstanding. Its underlying assumption is that, in the course of the nineteenth century, French collective memory took shape as an amalgam of various ideas and symbols promoted by successive (mostly republican) regimes since 1789, converging into a more or less consensual ‘national memory’, as Nora called it, with the stabilization of the Third Republic. That supposed memorial consensus, which would have been a result of the republicanization and nationalization policy of the regime, is often considered one of the explaining factors for its relative success. The other strand, represented among others by Christian Amalvi, Robert Gildea, Sudhir Hazareesingh and Neil McWilliam, starts from the insight that the republican tradition was anything but univocal and uncontested and that the French political landscape was characterized by a series of combats over the

14 For Michelet, ‘great men’ could only be glorified as personification of the people: Neefs, ‘La “haine des grands hommes” au XIXe siècle’, 759.


interpretation of the national past. McWilliam even speaks of ‘monumental intolerance’ to describe the verbal and sometimes actual fighting over monuments, commemorations and the representation of the past in the public sphere. This is in line with recent research in the field of memory studies in general, which shows that collective memories are often anything but consensual or univocal and that conflict over them is a normal and potentially effective way of keeping them alive. Memorial conflicts, moreover, reveal the constructed character of collective memories, which has much been stressed in recent scholarship about the role of media, mediation and performativity in cultural remembrance.

This article argues that performativity is crucial to the formation of cultural memory and that commemorative events do not primarily reflect but rather generate memories and shape people’s understanding of the past. But instead of choosing between the unifying and dividing potential of cultural memory, it will offer a third interpretation of commemorative practices in Third Republic France. It admits that in many commemorations, especially those that gained governmental support, the propagation of a consensus over the national past was the aim the organizers had in mind. This is also the motivation behind the official appropriation of Michelet in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, as will be shown hereafter. However, this article also argues that consensus was never simply there, ready to be reflected in the commemoration. Consensus was something to be reached in a process that could go wrong, and it was constantly contested by alternative memory cultures. And this could lead to outcomes that sometimes worked in practice but were not necessarily wanted by the organizers, nor by those who contested them.


18 N. McWilliam, Monumental Intolerance: Jean Baffier, a Nationalist Sculptor in Fin-de-siècle France (Philadelphia, 2000).


As the examination of the three commemorative events for Michelet will show, what actually took place in the search for commemorative ecumenism can best be described as a kind of ’banalizing’ of memory. The fact that both existing strands of interpretation overlook this possibility perhaps has to do with the uneasiness for researchers to admit the relative mundane character of the phenomena they study. Scholars of Michelet in the past have sometimes voiced their indignation about the official appropriation of the historian, feeling that it led to trivializing their object of study, but also because they felt it did not do justice to the richness of the figure and writings of Michelet. In this, they were undoubtedly right, but they meanwhile did not see that this official appropriation also led to an expansion of the public for Michelet’s work and commemorations.

This article argues that the banalizing of memory that took place in the commemorations of Michelet over the last quarter of the nineteenth century should not primarily be understood as a sign of decline, but that it was productive. This obviously goes against Michelet’s own ideas on the function of commemorations in a republican nation. Yet that should not obscure the fact that it was part of the scope of options offered by the malleability of Michelet’s memory, and in some contexts it could be the most viable option to fulfil the aims that the initiators had for a commemoration.

II

When Michelet died on 9 February 1874 in Hyères, it was far from evident that he would acquire the stature of the national historian he would attain some twenty-five years later. Unlike his former militant colleague and friend Edgar Quinet, he had not taken active part in the construction of a new republican regime after 1870, being too old and sick to do so. Moreover, in 1874 the Third Republic had certainly existed for more than three years, but the regime remained very unstable. However, when Michelet was finally buried at Père Lachaise, after more than two years of juridical and press struggle between his heirs about the place of the grave, the political situation had changed drastically. Although the constitutional laws of 1875 were no definitive warranty


22 The records of the legal cases are in: Paris, Archives de la Seine, Iᵉ Chambre, Jugements timbrés, 1874–1876, DU5 340; 362; 364; 390; 391. Athénaïs Michelet published her husband’s last will and two books to plead her case: Testament olographe de M. Jules Michelet (Paris, [1874]); A. Michelet, La Tombe de Michelet (Paris 1875); A. Michelet, La Mort et les funérailles de Michelet (Paris, 1876).
against a collapse of the republic, they determined the field in which politicians could lawfully operate, thus compelling also anti-republican forces to take the parliamentary way for the realization of their ideals. That is why the elections in the first months of 1876 were to be decisive: they would reveal if the French in the meantime had converted to republicanism or if they would vote for conservatives, as they had done in 1871. Although the senatorial elections resulted in a slight conservative majority, the Chambre was taken over by a coalition of different republican groups, running from the supporters of Gambetta, who at that moment represented the extreme fringes of the left, to the centre-left of Jules Simon. A centrist-republican government was formed, whose principal task was to show that republicans were able to bear governmental responsibility. Even if this coalition was quick to show its first cracks and the republic was again seriously threatened a year later, the months immediately after the elections were marked by an atmosphere of victory, and enthusiastic republicans sought for occasions to show their delight. It was exactly in this period that Michelet’s widow finally got the permission to bury her husband in Paris.

On 18 May 1876 a cortège dominated by students of the Quartier latin transported the coffin with the body from Michelet’s apartment at the rue d’Assas, nearby the Quartier latin, via Place de la Bastille to the graveyard. It was observed by a public of workers, housewives and children, and by the police, who estimated a crowd of about 15,000 people. At the graveyard, a ceremony was held with speeches by representatives of the Institut and the Collège de France, as well as by other well-known personalities, who spoke chiefly about topics such as Michelet’s achievements as a great historian and writer or as the organizer of archival research. More politically charged aspects of his work were mostly avoided. Édouard Laboulaye, speaking on behalf of the Collège de France, hardly touched upon the political activism of Michelet’s lectures and presented him, as much as was possible, as a ‘disinterested scientist’. Ernest Havet, one of Michelet’s former pupils at the École normale, recalled his courses and the success of his early history writing. The exception in this respect was the speech of Paul Challemel-Lacour, senator and member of the Parisian municipal council, who gave an overtly political funeral oration. To loud applause, as reported in several newspapers, he connected Joan of Arc, the republican victory of 1792 and the defeat of the Prussian War, in order to substitute with a republican alternative the narrative that the regime of the

23 Most information on the 1876 burial is provided by surveillance reports of the Parisian police: Paris, Archives de la Préfecture de Police, Fonds du Cabinet du Préfet de Police, BA 1187: Michelet. The number of 15,000 attendees appears in some of these reports, although others mention much higher or lower numbers. 15,000 seems however a reliable number, which is also consistent with the numbers of attendees at other republican burials in these years: A. Ben-Amos, Funerals, Politics, and Memory in Modern France (Oxford, 2000), 125–35.
24 The texts of the funeral orations are reproduced in several newspapers, for instance: Le Temps, 20 May 1876; L’Événement, 20 May 1876; Le Bien public, 19 and 20 May 1876.
moral order told about this defeat and to put forward republicanism as the only true form of patriotism.26

The ceremony was in most respects an exemplar of the tradition of opposition funerals that had originated in the Restoration and that had regained currency at the end of the Second Empire. Especially at moments when the authorities forbade other kinds of public demonstrations, the public and mostly non-religious funerals of leftist political personalities had become political manifestations, for which Emmanuel Fureix coined the term ‘enterrements-manifs’.27 Since these funerals tended to be tumultuous, the authorities were often suspicious of them and tended to regulate them by, for instance, allowing non-religious burials only in the early morning.28 In the early days of the Third Republic, following attempts by republican leaders to present themselves as responsible politicians capable of governing a country, riots had, however, become less common. According to Avner Ben-Amos, this tradition of political funerals paved the way for the tradition of republican state burials and ‘pantheonizations’ once the republican regime became established.29

The police’s close observation of the preparations of Michelet’s funeral testifies that they interpreted the occasion as following the template of the opposition funerals of the 1860s. A police officer on the beat in the student assembly three days before the funeral observed: ‘The radicals have, in addition, obtained what they desired, that is to say, to make the assembly declare that it intended to give the manifestation an anti-clerical and republican character.’30 Another police officer, however, foresaw that order would be easily maintained: ‘Today’s political state will make this manifestation very peaceful, which would have been the contrary if it had happened whether during the Empire, whether, even, during the period of the government of combat.’31 He proved to be right: both press and police alongside the route remarked the quietness of the crowd, which, apart from some isolated cries of ‘vive la République’, walked in complete silence.

Indeed, now that the republicans were—at least for the moment—leading the government, Michelet’s funeral could no longer be a straightforward opposition rally. If republican leaders had already urged attendees of earlier funerals to keep calm in order to demonstrate their seriousness, in this case riots and protests would have been even more inappropriate. In addition, although there was reason to mourn the dead historian, there was also reason to celebrate the

28 Ben-Amos, Funerals, Politics, and Memory in Modern France, 113–22.
29 Ibid., 135.
republican victory; and Michelet’s funeral happened to be the first occasion to do so. However, a new template for republican commemorations did not yet exist. The central-left Dufaure government had just had the time to announce a first republican festivity in the form of a universal exhibition to be held in 1878. Leftist fractions of the Parisian municipal council reacted to this initiative by announcing a commemoration of Voltaire and Rousseau for that same year, for which the government, however, withheld its support.32 Otherwise, everything had yet to be invented or re-invented for a republican regime. Michelet’s funeral was, as earlier republican funerals had been, a privately organized ceremony, the presence of numerous republican leaders notwithstanding. Indeed, besides Challemel-Lacour, the deputies Jules Ferry, Henri Wallon, Léon Gambetta, Louis Blanc and Georges Clemenceau attended, as did Victor Hugo, recently elected senator, whose presence granted the occasion much prestige. All, however, were only acting as private persons. And it was exactly this private character that made Michelet’s funeral, according to some republicans, an unsatisfactory event. A police officer watching the crowd reported that he heard complaints that ‘the French government refrains from representing itself at the funeral of one of its most illustrious historians’.33 In a similar vein, Le Bien public wrote: ‘If in another country than France ... a historian of Michelet’s calibre would die, the burial of this man would certainly be surrounded with national pomp.’34

The ceremony, then, had more or less the paradoxical aspects of a student demonstration and an oppositional rally celebrating a victory. In many respects it followed the older tradition of ‘enterrements-manifs’ albeit without the usual tumult. But some participants hoped for something more and were anticipating the republican state funeral this event could not yet be. This was the consequence of the particular situation in which the republican movement was no longer the opposition but had not yet had the time to invent a new and official form for such occasions.

III

 Shortly after the funeral, several initiatives were taken to erect a monument to Michelet. Some students started a collection for a statue in the Quartier latin, while Athénaïs Michelet wished for a magnificent tomb at Père Lachaise. The widow obtained her desired tomb, but it took six years to collect enough money and to erect it.35 The project received a boost when the Parisian city


33 APP, BA 1187, Anonymous report, 18 May 1876.

34 Le Bien public, 19 May 1876.

35 Public subscriptions were an internationally common means to finance monuments and commemorations, even in cases where governments could easily have provided the necessary
council donated a sum of 5,000 francs in February 1877. Then a committee consisting of republican leaders, journalists and old friends of Michelet was established for the collection of more money. Yet the gift of the municipality also charged the project with a particular political meaning, as the city council of Paris was mistrusted by the government ever since the Commune uprising of 1871. From 1870 onwards, it was a permanent stronghold of radical republicans attempting to increase the autonomy of the city vis-à-vis the national government and to pursue a more democratic policy. With this donation, the city council overtly appropriated Michelet to its own political ends, although it argued that it set an example for the whole nation. The donation of the Parisian municipal council thus turned what Michelet’s widow had intended to be a patriotic project transcending party boundaries into a radical affair.

This radical character is reflected by the lists of private benefactors, kept in Michelet’s archives at the Bibliothèque historique de la Ville de Paris. These lists, which circulated in the offices of republican newspapers and were distributed by the members of the committee, contain hundreds of names including those of many deputies and some senators. All of them were from republican groups, varying from the extreme left to moderate centrist republicans. The approximately 140 conservative and anti-republican members of the Chambre are absent from these lists. Many other donors came from academia; several students and schoolchildren offered a bit of their pocket money; and a collection was held among workers in the printing industry, with the argument that Michelet had been the son of a printer. Foreign donations made up a special category and underscore the activist connotations of the project: Italian risorgimento activists including Garibaldi, Polish nationalists and Portuguese ‘federal republicans and free-thinkers’. The Romanian government, recognizing its debt to Michelet for the ideological awakening that was crucial to the country’s recent independence, contributed 5,000 francs too.
Nonetheless, at the end of May 1877 the committee realized that more money was needed than individual subscribers could afford, and because of this the political overtones of the project changed in the direction desired by Athénaïs Michelet. Begging letters were sent to all municipal councils in France and a number of learned societies, evoking the patriotic duty to honour a national historian and writer. Reactions such as that of the secretary of the Société d’Emulation du Doubs show that the willingness to contribute indeed increased thanks to the loosening of the project’s associations with radicalism:

For us, who all have to be strictly neutral in the matter of religious or political dogmas, it is out of the question to adhere to this or that manifestation of the bright and deep thoughts of Jules Michelet. It is exclusively about associating our company to an act of high national decency towards the memory of a writer who has been one of the most brilliant incarnations of the French genius.  

Although the state government didn’t financially contribute—it seldom did for monuments erected for individual persons—the offerings of numerous French municipalities gave the project a nation-wide and patriotic character, shifting also the meaning of Michelet represented by the monument from a republican activist and student leader to a writer of national history. This is also expressed by the iconography of the monument, which consists of a marble statue of Clio, history’s muse, rising above a sculpture of the dead historian’s corpse. A bas-relief of Paris’ city scape is sculpted in the background, with the names of all contributing municipalities inscribed on the sides. The monument thus conforms to the common practice of depicting the social position or profession of the deceased person. While the arrangement of the two figures recalls medieval representations of death, with the soul of the deceased floating above his dead body, it also visualizes Michelet’s adage, which is quoted on the monument, that ‘history is a resurrection’.

Patriotism, together with a moderate and conciliatory republicanism, were also the main ideological characteristics of the ceremony with which the monument was unveiled in 1882. Athénaïs Michelet brought together a new committee in order to organize an inauguration on 13 July, to which the mayors of contributing towns were invited. The date, of course, had to emphasize the patriotic and republican feature of the event, while the text of the invitation explicitly referred to the Fête de la fédération of 1790. Although these obvious efforts gave the ceremony an official character, it formally remained a

43 BHVP, Manuscrits Michelet: monument de Michelet au Père Lachaise, i., fol. 136.
45 Fig. 1: Michelet’s tomb. Architect: Jean-Louis Paul; sculptor: Antonin Mercié. Photo: © Neurdein/Roger Viollet.
47 BHVP, Manuscrits Michelet: monument de Michelet au Père Lachaise, ii., fol. 46–47.
private initiative just as the funeral had been. Despite this, the patriotic character of the ceremony fitted exactly with the moderate and pacifying republican ideology of the so-called opportunist governments of the early 1880s, which pursued a policy of slow but steady republicanization of the institutions and of society, paying particular attention to the development of the national education system. In March 1882, parliament adopted the law of Ministre de l’Instruction publique Ferry on mandatory and secularist primary education. Ferry was also the main speaker for the unveiling ceremony of Michelet’s tomb. Although he did refer to Michelet’s revolutionary action in 1848, he mostly emphasized his patriotism, on which consensus was easier to achieve. Michelet had been the ‘apostle and priest of the Fatherland’, the people about which
he had spoken constituted the French republican nation. Moreover, Ferry presented Michelet as a forerunner who had already drawn the outline of the education policy he himself was implementing. On the other hand, he avoided mentioning his own personal relationship to Michelet, who had publicly supported his candidature in the 1869 elections. Ferry spoke as a statesman of a now firmly established republican government that honoured a national historian: ‘The government of the Republic has desired to join this homage in order to give it the national character it should have.’ Even if the initiative had been private, Ferry’s presence and words clearly turned this ceremony into a national commemoration, officialized by the regime.

It was precisely that officialization that came under attack from the radical leftist press, which moreover blamed Ferry for his role as the mayor of Paris who opposed the Commune of 1871. The radical paper *La Lanterne* complained that Ferry and the republicans of the government had stolen the commemoration from the Parisian city council. To those on the extreme left of the political spectrum Ferry represented a conservative regime of law and order, failing to achieve the republic by refusing the programme of social justice which, according to them, was inherent in the Revolution of 1789. In their eyes, the establishment of the republic could not be considered complete without further democratization and social reform, and until that date, Michelet did not belong to the regime, but to the ‘people’ as they interpreted it. That is why Jules Vallès, returned from London exile thanks to the general amnesty for the *communards* of 1880, savagely attacked Ferry in the radical newspaper *Le Réveil*: ‘Michelet is one of the fathers of that great new school that by the study of the annals of the fatherland concluded on the fatality of these explosions that are called civil wars, who discovers the anonymous force in the heart of the masses.’ In so doing, he used the polysemy of Michelet’s concept of ‘people’ by highlighting its mythical dimensions and its association with the poor that were absent in Ferry’s more elementary interpretation of the concept as the republican nation.

The reactions in the leftist press show that Michelet’s legacy was still contested in 1882, but this felt like a rearguard action. In fact, it had been the republican regime of Ferry and his associates that, by granting amnesty to the *communards* and establishing freedom of the press, had allowed this protest themselves. Hence, changes in the political situation between 1876 and 1882 turned Michelet from an oppositional ancestor into an official ideologue, a process that was visible by the changes in the ideological connotations of the subscription. The private character of the initiative demonstrates that the creation of a consensual interpretation of Michelet, which enabled his officialization, was not the result of governmental appropriation in the first place, but was

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stimulated from the bottom up. Michelet’s widow actively promoted this interpretation, realizing that it would serve both the durability of her husband’s legacy and the republican regime. This, however, ultimately came at the expense of more multi-layered interpretations of Michelet’s work, as Ferry’s speech and especially Vallès’ criticism of it show.

IV

The third commemoration of Michelet, and the most spectacular, took place sixteen years after the previous one, at the occasion of the centenary of his birth.52 Again an association with the national holiday of 14 July was made by planning the ceremony on the 13th instead of Michelet’s actual birthday on 21 August. But unlike the private initiatives of 1876 and 1882, this commemoration was an official one in which the historian was appropriated first by the city of Paris and then by the government. The Parisian municipal council had taken the initiative towards the end of 1897, after which the centenary was declared a national commemoration by the Ministre de l’Instruction publique, Rambaud.53 In so doing, he preferred Michelet’s centenary above all other jubilees of this same year, since 1898 was also the centenary of Auguste Comte’s birth, the fiftieth anniversary of the 1848 revolution and the semi-centenary of the death of Chateaubriand—all commemorated on private occasions. This official character implied the obligation for local communities to devote attention to the centenary too, alongside the festivities organized by the government and the city of Paris.54

The commemoration had to stimulate a sense of national unity in the country, which at the time was divided by endemic social unrest, new opposition movements at the extreme left and right and the Dreyfus Affair. The latter served since January 1898 as a battleground for fundamental debates about the nature of the political regime and what it meant to be French. The ecumenical patriotism on which the regime had been relying was threatening to break under the pressure of a rightist anti-republican nationalism and an upcoming socialist internationalism. Michelet was considered one of the main ideologues of the reconciling patriotism, his mythical people—stripped in official discourse from its revolutionary connotations—serving as the basis of the nation’s unity.


53 Bulletin municipal officiel, 4 Dec. 1897: session of 3 Dec. 1897, 3491; Rambaud, ‘Circulaire ... au sujet du centenaire de Michelet’.

54 For the commemoration outside Paris: Dalisson, ‘Le centenaire de la naissance de Michelet’.
His commemoration, therefore, offered an excellent occasion to reaffirm the principles of the regime.

The government-organized part of the ceremonies taking place in Paris drew upon the existing repertoire of republican commemorations and the national holiday of 14 July, which was loosely connected to traditions stemming from the revolutionary era. For instance, although Michelet's widow opposed attempts made in 1892 and again in 1899 and 1902 to pantheonize Michelet, the Panthéon was chosen as the location for the official ceremony. For the part of the commemoration that was organized under the auspices of the Parisian municipality, a gamut of spectacular features, which had been developed for public festivities under the Second Empire, was deployed. Furthermore, schoolchildren were involved and a sense of simultaneous experience in the whole country was created by the compulsory reading of a specially made anthology of Michelet's texts at every school's prize-giving ceremony, which traditionally took place on 13 July, the last day before the summer holidays.

The ceremony in the Panthéon was attended by the Président de la République, Félix Faure, the presidents of the Senate and the Chambre, a number of members of parliament, diplomats, Parisian city councillors, directors of educational and scientific institutions, and numerous other official representatives of the government and university. After a procession of several hundred schoolchildren, the ‘Marseillaise’ and some revolutionary songs, there were two speeches, reflecting the attempts of both the government and the more leftist-oriented city of Paris to appropriate Michelet. In his speech packed with quotes from Michelet's *Histoire de France*, Léon Bourgeois, the new Ministre de l'Instruction publique, referred to Michelet's own thoughts on the importance of education in a republic and the special place public festivals should have therein. For Bourgeois, celebrating Michelet was at the same time celebrating French history itself and, by its history, the French nation.

The second speech, by the socialist president of the municipal council of Paris,

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55 Republican leaders themselves traced back much of their ritual to the feasts of the revolution, analysed in: Ozouf, *La Fête révolutionnaire* and J. Erhard and P. Viallaneix (eds), *Les Fêtes de la révolution* (Paris, 1977), and this idea of a persistent tradition has also dominated for a long time the historiography. Nowadays, it has become more common to highlight the extent to which this results from a process of 'invention of tradition': S. Hazareesingh, ‘Conflicts of memory’, 196; E. Hobsbawn and T. Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983).


58 *Centenaire de la naissance de Michelet: Compte rendu officiel des fêtes*, ed. Conseil municipal de Paris (Paris, 1899), 11. This memorial publication of the City of Paris reports the programmes, speeches, music and lists of invitees of the events taking place in Paris, and is in itself a sign of the importance of the commemoration.
Louis Navarre, was more politically outspoken and criticized in ill-concealed terms the failure of the regime to live up to the ideal of humanity that Michelet’s work presented. Although encapsulated in a context that was created to beam out consensus about the existing regime, the critical dimension of Michelet’s work was thus not completely absent from this ceremony.

After this, festivities resumed in the evening with a banquet for the mayors of France’s major cities and numerous other invitees from the worlds of politics, education and press in the Hôtel de Ville. The popular festival scheduled for the afternoon had to be delayed because of heavy rain. The tradition of organizing banquets for expressing political messages was founded with the Fête de la fédération and had remained important throughout the nineteenth century, especially in the build-up to the revolution of February 1848, the officialization of Bastille Day in 1880 and during the Boulanger Affair. A banquet for the mayors of France as delegates of the entire population, which was imagined to repeat the picnics of the revolutionary festivals, was a recurrent part of all kinds of national festivities. In a toast that was more conciliatory than his morning speech, Navarre explicitly referred to this founding event, employing at the same time language that revealed the intimacy of this civil ritual with the religious: ‘It is a Fête de la fédération too, which reunites us this evening in one thought, which makes us commune with each other.’

Both official parts of the commemoration were thus firmly rooted in the traditions of the republican commemorative ritual, and, in the end, the dominant message of both was that of an official consensus about a patriotic and relatively uncritical interpretation of Michelet, presenting the existing republican regime as the logical outcome of the history he had recounted. Other interpretations were not completely eliminated, as Navarre’s morning speech shows, but did not fundamentally challenge the perception of an almost friction-less correspondence between the people Michelet had depicted and the French nation as represented by the officials attending the commemoration. Thus, via Michelet and his concept of a people whose unity transcended political strife, the government sought to depoliticize the republic that at this moment was precisely becoming the object of political contestation again.

In the meantime, the people of Paris were excluded, and had to wait until 24 July for their part of the commemoration to be rescheduled: a popular festival designed on behalf of the municipal council by the composer Charpentier and stage designer Roedel. This undoubtedly was the most successful part of the commemoration if considered in terms of public and media interest. The two men reused a model that had been a success in Lille shortly before: a spectacle with an occasional composition for an enormous choir, an orchestra and ballet dancers, of which the central figure would be a so-called Muse of Paris.

60 Centenaire de la naissance de Michelet, 36. The equivocal relationship between Third Republic civic ritual and religious practices is analysed in depth in: Ihl, La Fête républicaine.
a young and beautiful female worker elected by her peers. 61 This was completed with a parade of people dressed up as historical figures, delegations of schools, gymnastic clubs, choral societies and other associations alongside an enormous bust of Michelet sculpted especially for the occasion by Antoine Bourdelle. In short, the event was to be an amalgam of a historical parade, the habitual 14 July processions that presented the flower of the nation and something that not only in name resembled a Miss Paris contest.

The festival was thus conceived as a staged event, a show in which the people were expected to behave as well-managed actors instead of a feast made by themselves. This is further illustrated by the plan for the arrangement of the stage, which provided for two massive tribunes for invitees, between which a military band had to line up, thus blocking the view for all those who were not part of the invited happy few. 62 Another practical problem that the organizers discovered only late was the fact that Wednesday 13 July was—unlike 14 July—not a day off for most workers, which made participation in the parade impossible for many associations. 63

61 In Lille, a ceremony for the election of the Muse of Lille, directed by Charpentier as well, had taken place on 6 June: ‘La muse de Lille’, La Lanterne, 8 June 1898.
63 AP, VK3 112, ‘Couronnement de la Muse, Place de l’Hôtel de Ville, Centenaire de Michelet’: Letters from the presidents of the Union des sociétés d’instruction militaire de France,
However, the postponement of the event prompted the organizers to make some significant changes. The tribunes were removed and the military band was moved to the side, which opened the view to the stage. New announcements were published in the press, inciting the public to flock in large numbers and sometimes explicitly mentioning the fact that the tribunes would be taken down. Moreover, as 24 July was a Sunday, more associations and individuals promised to participate in the parade, sometimes at the invitation of Roedel, but often spontaneously. An effect of the rescheduling was, however, that the celebration of the Muse of Paris came to dominate the event to an even larger extent. Most newspapers wrote extensively and enthusiastically about the festival during the days afterwards, but in their headlines they mostly stressed the Muse and not Michelet.

The changes in the programme and staging unmistakably gave the festival a more popular character: more people could participate and more spectators...
could get a glimpse of the show. Nonetheless, the event provoked a storm of criticism. *Le Matin* and *Le Petit Journal* complained, for example, that it was hardly a commemoration of the historian at all, and that the public couldn’t understand the scarce references to Michelet.\(^67\) The Fédération française des travailleurs du livre, proud of its special relationship to the printer’s son Michelet, sent a letter to the organizers denouncing ‘this way of treating the workers, who are excluded from the favours that the municipality reserves for we don’t know whom; who are not allowed to appreciate reverentially the pretended democratic sentiments that animated the organizers of these festivals’.\(^68\) *La Typographie française*, the periodical of this union, compared the ‘cold official ceremony’ and the ‘narrow-minded’ festivities of 1898 with the spontaneous and truly republican funeral of 1876.\(^69\) Hence, according to the critics, the popular festival was a failure because it did not succeed in being really popular, nor effectively commemorate Michelet.

This twofold criticism points at an important dilemma the organizers had to face. Since the commemoration had to be a unifying occasion, it needed to rely exclusively on an interpretation of Michelet as a moderate and patriot.


\(^{69}\) N. Raflin, ‘Michelet’, *La Typographie française* [August 1898], 5.
Meanwhile, in order to reach the public, the commemoration needed to have popular aspects as well, but without appealing to the potentially anti-establishment features of Michelet’s work. In the Muse of Paris show, the organizers joined the demand for a popular commemoration to a harmless image of Michelet, which then made it a puppetry in the eyes of the critics.

This does not mean, however, that we should leave it to the critics to judge the event. In fact, as the newspapers show too, it attracted a large public and was a real success in this respect, something that is further confirmed by the fact that Charpentier and Roedel’s Muse coronation ceremony was repeated everywhere in the country in the following years. Admittedly, the commemoration as a whole did not succeed in overcoming the political divisions of the day, as had been Rambaud’s intention. But it is doubtful whether this realistically could have been expected of a commemoration, given the very real social and political problems. Instead of evaluating the event for what it was not or could not achieve, it seems more fruitful to ask what apparently made it a success in the eyes of large parts of the press. And in that respect, the spectacular element and the beauty contest among Parisian workers, which conveyed the message that fame was within reach for everyone, were crucial elements that neatly fitted in with the culture of spectacle of the fin-de-siècle Ville lumière.

The national unity that could not be realized via politics was reached to a certain extent by a common consumption of culture.

This almost necessarily entailed a vulgarization of the image of Michelet presented in the commemoration, which needed to fit into the show. Moreover, it had to be readable by a public who, if it knew who Michelet was, mostly remembered him as one of these national heroes and great writers learnt in primary school and who regularly returned in republican ritual. Most people would have read him in the simplified versions of primary school textbooks, alongside Le Tour de la France par deux enfants and some poems of Hugo. The commemoration was a popular success because it spoke the language that the Parisian public, who went viewing it as part of a Sunday afternoon stroll, expected and understood. In addition, by means of the historical parade, it managed to communicate to that public something of Michelet’s work.

V

The three commemorations show an increasing official appropriation of Michelet and reflected the political situation of the moment: where Michelet in 1876 was still considered too much of an opposition leader to deserve official

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70 This is also admitted by Rearick, who nevertheless evaluates the event according to its ‘political impact’ and concludes, basing his judgement on a lack of consensus in the political press, that it was only a partial success: Rearick, ‘Festivals and politics’, 74–5.


72 Datta, Heroes and Legends of Fin-de-siècle France, 5.
recognition, in 1898 he was due to stand for the republican consensus embodied in the state. As a consequence of this official appropriation, the commemorations saw an increasing ‘banalizing’ of memory. His *Histoire de France* was reduced to a series of historical protagonists that could form a parade, his moral and political ideas boiled down to a patriotism and republican pedagogy that served the regime. Critics could easily find arguments in Michelet’s work to denounce the staged character or lack of spontaneity of the 1898 commemoration and of the official appropriation as such.

However, tensions about how to commemorate Michelet and interpret his work were always combined with the desire shared by all to celebrate something together and to create a kind of ‘togetherness’ in commemorating. This could only be done by reconciling different interpretations of Michelet, based on different meanings of ‘people’. And this, in turn, was attempted by not spelling them out, which led to an emptying of meaning. This banalizing was thus a result of a genuine attempt at an ecumenism that could not be reached by imposing a uniform memorial substance, but only by allowing a plurality of interpretations to exist next to each other under the umbrella of a shared set of images, canonical names and representations.

While these three commemorations undoubtedly enlarged public acquaintance of Michelet and contributed to the creation of a canonical image of him, this would not have been possible without any prior public knowledge of his name. In that sense, these commemorations were performative expressions of a republican historical culture that was multimedial in character and was both promoted via the state school system as well as created by bottom-up initiatives of publishers seeking profit with popular stories, commemorative committees that were not unlike a writer’s fan club, working-class leisure associations and individual stakeholders such as Michelet’s widow. Hence, plurality also characterized the actors’ and public’s motivations, which cannot be reduced to the authorities’ intentions. Rather, the latter could only be communicated when fitted in with this wider historical culture, which was as much a phenomenon of commerce, entertainment and emotion as it was something political or pedagogical.

Despite the critics who invoked Michelet’s work, it can be argued that the malleability of that work allowed for this way of commemorating too. The historical references used by organizers of the commemorations indeed came from Michelet’s *Histoire de France*, and the speeches were packed with quotations that were indeed found in his texts, even if they were well chosen to fit the speaker’s purposes. Because he had written a large and very diverse oeuvre with multiple ambiguities, and because he had not been obliged to pronounce his opinion on the political questions that divided France in the 1890s, his work could be reread in that context to bring together people enjoying the spectacles of modern metropolitan consumption culture. Moreover, whereas great men were omnipresent in Michelet’s writings, in the meantime they could only be great insofar as they emerged from and personified the people as a whole. As Michelet’s widow in 1882 and Rambaud in 1898 argued,
commemorating Michelet was a way of commemorating the French nation of which he had written the history, hence the commemorating community itself. Sincere attempts to do so then resulted in the banalizing of Michelet's legacy. Of the 1898 popular festival, it can be said that its principal subject was not Michelet, but the people of Paris. If France in 1898 could be celebrated as a unity, then it would be as a modernizing nation state in which people, despite political divergences, enjoyed the same media, shared a set of cultural and historical references, which they had acquired through these media and by means of compulsory primary education, and formed an imagined community in doing so.\textsuperscript{73}