

Perhaps the best way for a British audience to understand Jean d'Ormesson is to compare him with an archetypal Oxbridge-educated, public school boy. It helps that he shared many of the same personal and cultural traits. A product of a noble family, and brought up in a palatial chateau in Burgundy, d'Ormesson was extremely bright, rather conservative and naturally given to irony. He was, inevitably, the product of France's finest educational institutions: he finished his school studies at the Lycée Henri IV in Paris, moved on to the École Normale Supérieure, and eventually gained his *agrégation* in philosophy, the most prestigious of humanities subjects. His pedigree and trajectory were impeccable. No one was surprised when, in 1973, he was admitted to the inner sanctum of the French literary establishment, the Académie française, at the age of forty-eight.

From then on, d'Ormesson became a fixture on the French cultural scene. Shortly after being elected to the Académie, he became one of the chief editors of the centre-right daily newspaper *Le Figaro*. He resigned in 1977 but continued to write an influential column well into the 1980s, alongside myriad other commitments. Crucially, he also knew how to play the role of the media intellectual. He was a charming and well-spoken man, which made him a perfect television personality. Throughout the 1970s, he was a regular guest on the country's premier televised literary chat show, *Apostrophes*. He cosseted viewers with his easy-going and learned banter about books, ideas and women (roughly in that order).

There were, inevitably, some awkward moments. His visceral anti-communism, his nostalgia for French Indochina, and his open support for the Vietnam War earned him enemies on the Left in the 1970s. And, in later years, his endorsement of presidential candidates like Nicolas Sarkozy was a reminder that he was an unashamed man of the Right. But he earned plaudits for his successful battle to get the first woman admitted to the Académie française (Marguerite Yourcenar in 1980), and even his political enemies were forced to admit that he had acquired the status of national treasure by the time of his death in December 2017. Emmanuel Macron spoke for many French people when he described him as "the best of the French spirit, a unique mix of intelligence, elegance and mischievousness, a prince of letters who never took himself too seriously" in his Twitter eulogy. ("Il était le meilleur de l'esprit français, un mélange unique d'intelligence, d'élégance et de malice, un prince des lettres sachant ne jamais se prendre au sérieux. L'œil, le sourire, les mots de Jean d'Ormesson nous manquent déjà.") The fact that d'Ormesson died on the same day as the legendary singer Johnny Hallyday only served to reinforce the feeling that the author's destiny was intertwined with that of France as a whole.

Yet, despite the accolades, there was always something surprising about d'Ormesson. This came from the fact that he stood apart from many of the dominant tendencies of post-war French intellectual life. In the 1950s and 60s, most French intellectuals were fascinated by Marxism, and they accepted that politics and literature should be saturated with abstract theorizing of the kind that Simone de Beauvoir wrote about in her novel *Les Mandarins* (1954). Young students took as their intellectual role models people like Jean-Paul Sartre, Louis Althusser (who, coincidentally, taught



A waxwork figure of Jean D'Ormesson at the Musée Grévin, Paris

Unique mélange

A playful classic of the French canon

EMILE CHABAL

Jean d'Ormesson

THE GLORY OF THE EMPIRE

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d'Ormesson at the École Normale Supérieure), or Claude Lévi-Strauss. Art – like life – was supposed to be serious.

But d'Ormesson was resolutely lightweight. As he often said, his writing was designed to "entertain". Both in print and in person, his self-conscious levity was at odds with the heavyweight philosophizing of his time. Thus, while France's chattering classes were grappling with the meaning of totalitarianism in the late 1970s and early 80s, d'Ormesson was writing about the creation of the world in *Dieu, sa vie, son oeuvre* (1981) and recounting Chateaubriand's romantic dalliances in *Mon Dernier Rêve sera pour vous* (1982). This was an author who took evident pleasure in ignoring the intellectual fashions of his day.

Published a decade earlier, *La Gloire de l'Empire* (1971) was written in the same playful and irreverent spirit. Although d'Ormesson had been writing novels since the mid-1950s, it was this book that placed him firmly on the literary map. It sold over 100,000 copies and was rewarded with the Grand prix du roman de l'Académie française. It also brought him to a non-French audience. The book was published in many languages – the version under review here is a reprint of Barbara Bray's original 1974 English translation for Knopf – and the young author subsequently acquired a global stature worthy of his noble ancestors, many of whom had been leading diplomats.

The plot of *The Glory of the Empire* is very

simple. It is a story of the rise and fall of an ancient empire. The narrator-historian chronicles the internecine struggles, epic battles and endlessly shifting cast of heroes who populate a vast landscape that corresponds roughly to West Central Europe during the Roman Empire. At the heart of the book is Alexis, the Empire's greatest leader. He is a man of mythical and mystical proportions, and the plot is built around his emergence and dramatic demise. There are asides about daily life and political ideas, but this is fundamentally a tale of great men doing great things in great times.

Stated so bluntly, the book sounds like little more than an Asterix comic strip in prose. Indeed, it would be quite reasonable to assume that the success of the novel was a consequence of the Asterix series, which exploded onto the market in the mid-1960s. But a careful reader will see that there was more to d'Ormesson's grandiose historical narrative than simply his stated desire to entertain. Two things stand out in particular: the inadvertently postmodern approach to history; and a deep scepticism about historical theory.

Postmodernism, as an intellectual movement, did not really exist in the early 1970s – and, even if it had, d'Ormesson would surely not have identified with it. Nevertheless, *The Glory of the Empire* can be described as a postmodern novel, in which a fabricated narrative of history gradually begins to shape reality. Unlike fantasy novels, which situate their empires in entirely fictional universes, d'Ormesson embeds his story in a thousand years of Western civilization. He refers to real people – Aristotle, Montesquieu and Jorge Luis Borges, among many others – and attributes to them entirely made-up "interpretations" of a non-existent empire. He even creates an entire scholarly apparatus for the book. The text is littered with footnotes and there is a generous bibliography of further

reading. Every single reference is made up, but an inexperienced reader could be forgiven for going to their nearest university library catalogue to look up Noam Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures of the Languages of the Empire* or Bertrand Russell's "now slightly outmoded but still classic study", *Hermetides and Paraclitus*, supposedly published by Oxford University Press in 1936.

Part of this conceit is a simple game. D'Ormesson wants us to take seriously the book's opening epigraph that "history is a novel that happened; a novel is history that might have happened". But, at a deeper level, he is challenging us to think about how history is made and written. What is a legitimate source? Does it really matter what "truth" is? Should historians accept that they are little more than glorified storytellers? Over the subsequent decades, these questions became central to the epistemology of history. Postmodern and linguistic turns forced the historical profession to reconsider its relation to "facts". But d'Ormesson was neither a leading figure in these discussions, nor a significant historian in his own right. Instead, he correctly guessed the future direction of debate by making history the central protagonist of his novel. Seen in this light, *The Glory of the Empire* looks rather more prescient than its subject matter suggested at the time.

The second important feature of the book comes from what it says about historical theory. D'Ormesson was far too clever not to know the difference between Lacanian psychoanalysis, structuralism and Spinoza, but he took great pleasure in lampooning them all. In true mock-scholarly style, the reader is treated to pointed barbs about the "Marxist" interpretation of the Empire's social structure, and fictitious arguments between French and British historians about the motives behind Alexis's actions.

Again, some of this was little more than a tongue-in-cheek game. D'Ormesson loved the Roman Empire and once described his encounter with the history of Rome as akin to "making love to a good woman". This book, then, was intended to read like an affectionate parody of Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. But the lampooning of historical theory also had a more serious purpose. D'Ormesson, like Alexis de Tocqueville before him and Pierre Nora after him, wanted to restore a transcendental quality to the writing of history; he felt that readers should experience wonder and awe at Alexis's exploits, not get bogged down in theoretical disquisitions. Running as a thread through the whole text is a hankering for the kind of grand narratives that underpinned so much nineteenth-century French historical writing.

So, which is it? Should we read the book as a postmodern thought experiment or a clarion call to make history great again? The answer is probably both. As many historians have observed, modern French thought has been marked by a tension between high levels of abstract theorizing and a constant desire to create grand narratives. The cultured and mischievous Jean d'Ormesson knew that, for every reader who enjoyed abstract theory, there would be at least ten more yearning for a good story. With *La Gloire de l'empire*, he struck the ideal balance: he indulged his readers' delusions of grandeur, without ever patronizing them. The result was a winning formula that earned him a permanent place in the French literary canon.