The Affair erupted at the moment when France stood at the peak of its cultural and intellectual influence. It was so corrosive precisely because it took place largely in Paris, the uncontested ‘City of Light’, the reigning capital of art, culture and modernity, and the birthplace of revolutionary ideas of justice and freedom. The 1890s was the glittering decade of the fin de siècle; Debussy, Saint-Saëns and Fauré were at the height of their powers, while Degas, Toulouse-Lautrec, Pissarro, Moreau, Renoir and Monet were painting some of their finest works. Zola, France, Huysmans, Gide, Proust and Barrès – many of whom would be profoundly affected by the Affair – were advancing their reputations or beginning their careers. Marie Curie discovered the atomic properties of uranium, and Henri Poincaré published some of his most influential work in mathematics. The Eiffel Tower, that iron symbol of modern engineering, was only a few years old. The Gaumont motion picture company was founded to offer entertainment to the masses. Architects and city planners experimented with art nouveau design, extended the Metro and lit up the capital’s boulevards with electricity. With its café culture, mass circulation press, cinemas, international exhibitions and imperial extravaganzas, Paris exemplified the democratization of politics, the flowering of culture and the promise of the modern.

For many, Paris and Republican France were civilization. Liberal commentators half expected ‘backward’ countries dominated by authoritarian, monarchical regimes – such as Russia, Poland, the Czech lands and Romania – to persecute their large Jewish minorities, and were not surprised that Junker elites in the German Reich blocked Jews from rising in the military and civil service. But the anti-Semitic outburst seemed somehow incongruous in France, the country that had abolished all legal sanctions against Jews and that, moreover, had only a tiny number of them – around 71,800 in a population of 38 million in 1897.

Today the Affair retains a unique place in the French political psyche. In 2006 Jacques Chirac, then president of the Republic, marked the centenary of Dreyfus’s rehabilitation with a speech at the site of his degradation ceremony at the Ecole militaire. Chirac proclaimed that the Affair had been a ‘conspiracy of injustice opposed by honour and truth’, a ‘universal combat’ between ‘two conceptions of the individual and of the nation’, which had ended with justice showing its impartiality, intellectuals exercising moral authority, and the triumph of ‘humanist values of respect and tolerance’.

His words encapsulated what has now become the orthodox interpretation of the Affair’s meaning and significance. Such triumphalism is good rhetoric but poor history; it downplays to the point of caricature the sordid dimensions of the Affair, which even today many French seek to forget. Not only was Dreyfus convicted twice, but his release was due to a backroom political fix, not to the triumph of justice. Afterwards, the perpetrators of the military cover-up were given immunity, and the chief conspirator, General Auguste Mercier, was elected to the Senate. Indeed, there was a legal amnesty granted to everyone involved in the Affair, which primarily benefited the anti-Dreyfusards. The campaign for Dreyfus’s final exoneration gathered pace in 1903 because it became linked to a partisan and bitter crusade against religious congregations, and not because there was a groundswell of support for his case. And even this campaign succeeded only because the Cour de cassation, the high court, used an obscure prerogative to take the case away from the system of military justice, which did not admit its error. The end of the Affair produced no clear conclusion and no real justice, merely a political truce. The result was a bitterness that rankled for years.

Yet, if there was no conclusive triumph, the Dreyfusards none the less dominated the Affair’s subsequent history, which has been largely written from their point of view. The interpretation was first synthesized by Joseph Reinach, a key participant in the events, who wrote a seven-volume, exhaustively documented study. Reinach blended the tale of espionage – with its spymasters, betrayals, cover-ups, secret letters and forgeries – with the compelling story of a cruel injustice in which an innocent man was crushed by lies, conspiracy and anti-Semitism. It was not until the early 1960s that historians added substantially to Reinach’s account by uncovering vital new evidence. Marcel Thomas wrote the first study of Esterhazy’s perfidy by diligently following the trail of waste-paper bins, disreputable officers and deceit high and low. In 1983 Jean-Denis Bredin wrote a stunning synthesis that linked military
introduction

The Dreyfusard position was elaborated in study after study, as more detailed historiography opened up a new range of topics in French political, social and cultural history. The nature of anti-Semitism, the reactions of the Jewish community, the political groupings of the right and left, have all now received extensive treatment. An important part of this outpouring was the scholarly attention given to the ‘birth of the intellectuals’, the emergence of the Dreyfusard elite that exemplified a new, and peculiarly French, social type dedicated to democratic ‘engagement’. Equally significant was the careful analysis of the writings and activities of the right, the ‘anti-intellectuals’ who were often cast as proto-fascists. Many of these works envisaged the Affair as a prelude to the battles of left-wing intellectuals and socially progressive Republicans against anti-intellectual reactionaries and right-wing activists in the inter-war years of the twentieth century.

The centennial of the Affair stimulated historians to re-examine the inner workings of the military and the institutions of the Republican state, to update biographies of famous activists, and to revisit the war between ‘intellectuals’ and ‘anti-intellectuals’. And yet the Republican vision of virtue triumphant still remained the template for interpretation. Vincent Duclert’s magisterial biography of Alfred Dreyfus published in 2006 was perhaps the summit of this endeavour. It performed a vital service by providing the first authoritative life story of Dreyfus himself, who had always been portrayed as a diffident figure sidelined by those who defended him, a cause of the Affair but not a significant actor in it.

Duclert challenged the view that Dreyfus was a poor Jewish victim rescued by the heroic and dashing Picquart, but stopped well short of reassessing the underlying assumptions about the Affair. By subtitling his book ‘The Honour of a Patriot’, Duclert implicitly took for granted that specific models of honour and patriotism existed then and now. Although he demolished the negative view of Alfred Dreyfus, he sustained another myth of him as an exemplar of certain Republican values. He even called for Dreyfus’s consecration in the Panthéon, the nation’s secular temple, so that Dreyfus would be elevated to the same level as Zola, whose remains lie there. Rather than questioning the ideological of the Dreyfusards, Duclert’s campaign attempted to add one more – admittedly the most important – to the list of Republican heroes.

The oppositions laid out by Chirac and endorsed by Duclert endure because they have more than a kernel of truth. Protagonists on both sides wanted to represent two different value systems and two opposing views of French identity. Dreyfusards were outraged by the military conspirators who doctored evidence against an innocent man while shielding the real culprit. The anti-Dreyfusards were equally angered that, in an era of international rivalry, their opponents seemed ready to weaken the army for the sake of a Jew. The conventional accounts also rightly trace the evolution of new left- and right-wing configurations in French politics. By joining together to defend moral and judicial values, centrist Republicans, socialists and anarchists discovered common political ground and social concerns. On the other side, Catholics, monarchists and anti-parliamentarian radicals grouped together to repudiate notions of Republican citizenship in favour of ‘traditional’ France, nationalist discipline and, often, anti-Semitism.

The story of ‘two Frances’ locked in combat thus appears to explain how a single miscarriage of justice could have caused such political turmoil. But this approach, with its implication of inevitability, obviates the need for any more considered explanation. It makes the moral rigidity and increasing intolerance of the two sides appear natural and even predictable, when in fact many campaigners’ loyalties were anything but predetermined. Especially at the outset of the Affair, decisions about whether to take part in the campaign, and on which side, were often fraught with hesitation and doubt. Some of the most crucial Dreyfusards remained strongly anti-Semitic, even as they battled for Alfred’s release; equally, there were important ‘anti-intellectuals’ who denounced racial anti-Semitism, but still campaigned against Dreyfus as a means of supporting the army. The two blocs were never as monolithic as is usually supposed, and fracture lines within the coalitions always threatened their delicate unity.

The Affair was different from conventional politics because it seemed to demand from activists a rare kind of passionate involvement. Dreyfus became a catalyst for existential debates about the nature of political and moral redemption and exposed participants’ most cherished beliefs and personal philosophies. This unusually intense process of emotional
mobilization shaped the Affair's direction and meaning. Analysing it reveals how personality, friendship, love, hate and above all fear were key elements in a tale that has too long been confined to the more familiar terrain of conventional military, political and social history.

Examining the emotional dimension is made the more difficult by the special place of ideas in French political culture. The long and abiding rationality while obscuring the emotional components of political ideology. But a better understanding of the Affair requires a fundamental rethinking of the struggle between the 'intellectuals' and 'anti-intellectuals'. The Dreyfusards are usually depicted as employing rationality and science to combat the irrational prejudice of their opponents, but they were just as preoccupied with the interplay of reason and unreason, and intellect and instinct, as their enemies. Both factions embraced the negative, destructive implications of evolutionary theory; and they were equally fascinated by the nature of myth and magic, and by the role of the 'unconscious' in mass politics. The interest that some Dreyfusards had in spiritualism, which was not unlike their opponents' attraction to the occult, was deeply embarrassing for their colleagues.

Freud coined the phrase the 'narcissism of marginal difference' to explain the rage that erupts between combatants who hold much in common. Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards came to detest one another precisely because many of the key players had been old friends and respected colleagues, and had begun from similar premises and concerns. The distinctions that they ultimately drew did matter, but the ideologies they devised were fraught with contradiction. At one level the debate was a struggle over the legacy of the Enlightenment. 'Anti-intellectuals' rejected the universalism of the Rights of Man in favour of a conception of French identity that was based on language and race. They believed that a 'true' French morality had to exclude Jews, Protestants and Freemasons in order to preserve a unique national community. Many celebrated the fin de siècle cult of the 'self' and delighted in artistic decadence, but were nevertheless attracted to Catholicism and its claims to ethical certainty and spiritual authority.

Dreyfusard 'intellectuals' too had important tensions in their position. They retained a belief in a universal moral code and trusted in rationality as a guide to ethical conduct. Correct judgements, they held, could be made only on the basis of evidence, and they maintained that Catholicism and anti-Semitism were roads back to a pre-Enlightenment obscurantism. They almost always advocated the 'disenchantment' of the world in order to rein in 'superstition'. At the same time they maintained that unconscious impulses and mythological beliefs often shaped social relations, and they were far from convinced that human rationality could channel the dangerous urgings of instinct and irrational prejudice. In the end, the more radical abandoned much of their liberal humanitarianism and cemented their victory through an all-out assault on the Church, closing down congregations, expelling orders of priests and establishing an iron grip over the educational system.

Such a cocktail of contradictory fears and beliefs hints at the emotional complexity of the Affair, and reveals a seemingly incoherent world of feeling that is difficult to interpret. Indeed, much social-scientific methodology of the 1960s onwards was designed to release historians from the need to analyse such apparently impressionistic material. Nor did the innovations of the 1980s and 1990s, when historians engaged with postmodernism and the linguistic turn, prompt an analysis of the impact of emotions on politics and society. As scholars focused their attention ever more narrowly on texts and bodies of texts, they pursued an increasingly decontextualized analysis of documents in which individual actors were subordinated to a larger discussion of 'discourse'.

In contrast, my account of the Affair is about the people involved, and the links between intimate and collective psychologies. The belief in Dreyfusard 'rationality' simply does not square with evidence from their letters; many Dreyfusards, for instance, championed the Jewish captain not because they had clear proof of his innocence, but simply because they believed the Jesuits were responsible for his conviction. When right-wing anti-intellectuals attacked Zola after 'J'accuse', they were predisposed to reject his arguments because they detested his literary naturalism and saw him as a corrupting influence who could not possibly act in the best interests of the nation. Zola's intervention enabled old opponents to link the fiction they had always hated with the 'unpatriotic' politics they now denounced, and combining the two made their assault all the more powerful. On both right and left, positions were shaped by long-standing animosities and prejudices rather than by evidence alone.
If intellect and emotion meshed, so too did private and public worlds. Sometimes the private dramas of the leading protagonists had a profound impact on how they engaged with the Affair. People became involved through a web of relationships; salonnieres converted leading members to join the cause on one side or the other; individuals recruited their relations or lost family connections when relatives chose the other side; old friendships broke apart, and new relationships formed that were for ever based on the memory of activism. Because of this personal investment, the Affair generated extremes that ranged from camaraderie to vicious intolerance, feelings that contributed to the unique political atmosphere that infused the cause célèbre.

The opponents also made use of the language of martyrdom, sacrifice and suffering to engage their adherents, and Jews, Protestants and Catholics alike all evoked the religious struggles of the Ancien Régime to strengthen their resolve. Religious ideas found their way into literary debate, the occult and spiritualism impinged on nationalism, and both sides borrowed across the science / religion divide. Indeed, rather than marking the final triumph of secularism, the Affair demonstrates the integral role of religion in the conflicts of ‘modernity’. Visionary, even apocalyptic, beliefs encouraged demonic and conspiratorial fantasies, especially on the right. On the other side, Dreyfusard humanitarianism was sometimes compromised by elitism, social pessimism and the intermittent fanaticism of its own Republican civic religion. The Dreyfusards felt persecuted, and with reason, for they were facing a massive conspiracy. They lived through events that made them doubt the Republican institutions that were their lodestar, and this painful experience sometimes led them to intolerance, bitterness and a desire to persecute in turn.

If the Dreyfus Affair started as the business of an elite, it became the obsession of many. A variety of sources illuminate the connections between individual and group psychology: newspaper polemics, memoirs, postcards, posters, printed volumes and tens of thousands of letters written during and after the Affair. The letters have sometimes been used by historians to reconstruct the conspiracy, itself no mean feat, but they reveal far more than concrete details of what happened and when. Above all this material conveys a sense of the political process in motion. Private individuals put pen to paper and wrote to the famous, offering emotional support and confessing how the Dreyfus Affair awakened old miseries or sparked new possibilities. Jews mused about their origins and identity in French society; humble activists in the regions explained how the Affair refocused their political and moral energies; right-wing men of letters expressed their delight when the press vilified their opponents, sighing with satisfaction that at last the clever men of the Parisian Republican establishment were getting their comeuppance.

Mass literacy made it possible for even the most humble to put down their thoughts: the Republic had taught virtually everyone to write, and they did so with an enthusiasm that only the telephone would later suppress. The conventions of French correspondence are intricate, and many of the letters, although hardly transparent, offer insights that published pamphlets, articles or political statements cannot provide. They contain unguarded expressions of fantasy and play, obscenity and humour, which reveal the important role of unfettered feelings in the making of political ideology. Strange juxtapositions and unconscious slips offer a way to interpret obliquely articulated emotion. Letter-writers often idealized the major protagonists, creating and copying an emotional vocabulary that also circulated in the newspapers. Elsewhere the correspondents betray fear, repugnance, shame and humiliation; by confiding such emotions, they found new friends and important political allies.

Unpublished letters also reveal the madness that sometimes touched key participants in the Affair as they stoked the controversy to frenzied levels. The poet Charles Peguy, a socialist and a Catholic, wrote famously of the Dreyfusard ‘mystique’, a high-mindedness that at times spilled over into dangerous excess. Key Dreyfusards displayed intense mood swings that unsteadied the coalition’s emotional balance, while some anti-Dreyfusards became so obsessed by fears of Jewish subversion that their feelings seemed to border on paranoia. When more humdrum times returned, activists longed to get back on the political roller-coaster that had so suited their temperaments. They missed the excitement, and were nostalgic for the clarifying emotional absolutism that the Affair had encouraged.

This book begins by examining Alfred Dreyfus’s arrest and degradation, following both the trail of military conspiracy and the painful birth of