The chronological format in which this work is presented has been designed to enable the reader to follow, on a day-by-day basis, the evolution of a singular act of injustice into a world affair, its diverse ramifications and, within a broad historical context, gain an insight into its roots, consequences and issues of universal significance. Its aim is to provide an accurate and impartial account of the facts as they are known, the theories and suppositions put forward by historians and commentators, yet leaving the reader to form his or her own conclusions. The appendices serve to illuminate the main issues.

A deliberate miscarriage of justice, masterminded by the army, condoned by its judiciary, fuelled by racial prejudice, political skulduggery and a nascent press combined to create the Dreyfus Affair. Variously classified as a French affair, a Military affair, a Family affair, a Jewish affair – it was all of these and more.

The Dreyfus Affair went far beyond the confines of France at the turn of the 20th century, beyond too, the story of the innocent Captain Alfred Dreyfus, an unwanted Jew on the French General Staff. It was a series of events that brought into the spotlight a host of political, social and moral issues. It split France in two, saw the emergence of the intellectual and the engagement of the citizen and paved the way for new forms of civic and political expression. Its repercussions were and remain worldwide. Further afield, the Affair became a crucible for a host of human rights issues such as racism and the rights of the individual against the organs of State. Today, the Affair remains a touchstone for issues of primary importance for our societies.

An injustice becomes an affair when social passions and conflicting ideologies are aroused. France was torn by conflict – friends and relatives clashed, every dinner party and street corner became a battleground. The country was in turmoil. Society was divided, families were split. Dreyfusards clashed with anti-dreyfusards. Violence was in the air. Antisemitic riots ravaged the cities of France. An emerging media, flexing its muscles for the battles of the 20th century, propelled the fate of one soldier into history and the Affair shed its light and cast its shadow into every home in France and eventually abroad.

‘Death to the Jews’ drowned the protests of Alfred Dreyfus during his public degradation as he was stripped of his rank, his honour and ironically, the emblems of the very ideals which had guided his life, love of the army and devotion to the Patrie. His calvary was to last 12 years and the Affair it precipitated was to become one of the most troubled periods in the history of France, recording for future generations the far seeing testimony of the social turbulence of the times and its implications for the century to follow. The scene of this
drama was set by two historical events many centuries apart: the humiliating defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 and the appearance of the Gospels 1800 years earlier.

The defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War dealt a grievous blow to the pride of the nation. The army became the sacred instrument of revenge. It would recapture the lost territories of Alsace-Lorraine and regain France’s honour. The army was revered, it was beyond reproach. It was the hallowed institution whose General Staff Alfred Dreyfus joined as a probationary officer in 1893.

The influx of foreigners and Jews into France in the second half of the 19th century met with mounting antagonism from the populace and in an atmosphere of growing xenophobia the slogan ‘France for the French’ became paramount. Antisemitism gathered pace when the writer Edouard Drumont, who was to become known as the ‘Pope of Antisemitism’, arrived on the scene. The Catholic Church and the Assumptionist daily La Croix had long maintained an anti-Jewish stance and the venom of Drumont would drive their bigotry to fever pitch. ‘To be French was to be Catholic’. All others, especially Jews, were suspect. These undercurrents – France’s defeat by Germany, reverence for the army and mistrust of the Jew – were to converge in the Affair and burst the dams of all social restraint, creating a torrent of hate and abuse on an unprecedented scale.

The Affair’s galaxy of dramatis personae – as Pierre Dreyfus (the son of Alfred) described its main protagonists – exhibited the whole gamut of human virtues and failings. General Mercier, the intransigent Minister of War who, for reasons never discovered, continued to affirm the guilt of Dreyfus long after he was declared innocent; the courageous Lieutenant-Colonel Picquart, not without his own prejudices, whose devotion to truth, ‘the greatest service I can render my country’, took precedence over his obedience as an army officer; Emile Zola, who turned the tide of history with his audacious ‘J’Accuse’, the first mediatic response to an injustice and history’s most famous plea for human rights; Edouard Drumont, whose ranting antisemitism became a rallying cry of hatred; Major Henry whose devotion to the army was rooted in dishonesty and the dissolute Major Esterhazy who proudly asserted that he ‘only lied on orders’ and whose pliable morality made him the ideal servant of a morally corrupt General Staff. And then, Lucie Dreyfus, a paragon of loyalty striving to survive as the reviled wife of a traitor; Mathieu Dreyfus, the ‘good’ and devoted brother, steadfast in his mission to exonerate Alfred. And the central character, exiled from his Affair on Devil’s Island, in solitary confinement, stoically enduring his mental and physical torture, unaware of the passions his fate had unleashed which were tearing his country apart – a victim of his own illusions, never understanding that he was the unwanted Jewish officer, the unwelcome intruder. Paradoxically, his world contracted as the Affair expanded and, as perceived by Hannah Arendt, the dramas of 20th-century France went into rehearsal.
In the world beyond Devil’s Island an anxious Europe was awaiting the day of reckoning. Alliances were being forged but trust was at a low ebb; espionage and counter-espionage were rife. The reader, when embarking on a study of the Affair, is well advised to remember Esterhazy’s dictum: ‘in espionage and counter-espionage nothing is as it seems to be’. Therein lie the fascination and frustrations of the Affair. Information collides with misinformation; the absence of information is compensated by a plethora of credible and incredible theories. Lies, forgeries, duplicity and cover-ups were the rule of the day in a ‘kaleidoscopic’ affair whose shifting elements allow any number of configurations.

However the reader navigates this quagmire of contradictions – whose evaluation becomes a personal choice – he will reach the unresolved questions which lurk at the heart of the Affair. Who wrote the bordereau and why? What did Henry know that necessitated his death, and who was the person he indicated in his letter to his wife Berthe just before he died, ‘you know in whose interest I acted? What was the ‘terrible secret’ that Esterhazy recalled on his death bed and which guaranteed his protection by the General Staff, whatever the circumstance, but demanded his exile, never to set foot in France again? Were the two men guardians of the same secret? Was there a high-ranking ‘officer X’, as suggested by Paléologue, who was a spy and whose identity had to be kept secret at all cost? These are unfinished chapters which will no doubt continue to attract further investigation. Meticulous research in Russian, Italian and German archives may yield some clues.

The Affair was not without its visionaries. Zola, horrified by the eruption of antisemitism addressed his letters to France and to France’s youth:

*France, you have allowed the rage of hatred to lash the face of your people, poisoned and fanatic they scream in the streets ‘Down with the Jews’, ‘Death to the Jews’.*

*What sorrow, what anxiety at the dawn of the 20th century.*

George Clemenceau, foreseeing the emergence of the totalitarian state, warned:

*when the right of a single individual is injured, the right of all is in peril, the right of the nation itself.*

But Drumont had preceded them. Planting the signpost which would eventually lead to Drancy, he predicted with spine-chilling accuracy:

*the Jews must be eternally blind as they have always been not to realise what is awaiting them. They will be taken away as scrap … The leader who will suddenly emerge will have the right of life and death … he will be able to employ any means that suit his purpose. The great organiser will achieve a result which will resound throughout this universe.*

The appearance of the Gospels, which led to the accusation of deicide against the Jewish people, marked the genesis of the longest libel in
history. Enriched by groundless accusations and calumnies over the centuries, poisoning of wells, Satanic practices, taking the blood of Christian children for Passover, a Jewish stereotype emerged, a Judas figure, increasingly despised and increasingly embedded into the culture of Christian Europe. The Jews, a defenceless minority, were never in a position to challenge these allegations and unchallenged allegations harden into fact. The Jews became, by definition, guilty. As in the case of Alfred Dreyfus, evidence never reached the scales of justice but was moulded to corroborate the prejudice.

Dreyfus was doubly betrayed. Firstly, the collective conscience of his judges responded more to Jesuit indoctrination and unquestioning obedience to army discipline than the call of justice; secondly, after the callous Rennes verdict, an ignoble pardon was followed by a hurried amnesty bill in 1900 to close the unfinished chapters and stifle the embarrassing course of justice.

Nevertheless, the Dreyfus Affair was a turning point in French and European history and triggered many major developments: the strengthening of the Republic; the separation of Church and State; the power of the media and its manipulation of public opinion; Herzl’s vision of a Jewish State and his manifesto *Judenstadt*. It paved the way for the publication of the fraudulent *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, consolidated anti-Jewish sentiments and laid the groundwork for the excesses of Vichy France.

Above all, the Affair was a warning signal highlighting the fragility of human rights in our most ‘developed’ societies. Although it is arguable whether antisemitism was the most significant aspect of the Affair, it was this aspect whose significance became paramount in the century that followed, when human rights were desecrated to the point of annihilating a whole people. It is therefore vital to examine the power of prejudice and its mechanism, as revealed in the Dreyfus Affair.

Dreyfus recalls in his diary how, as a young boy, he cried with sadness as he watched the German Army march into his home town Mulhouse during the Franco-Prussian War. He swore to become a soldier and drive the enemy from his country. He kept his promise and began the hazardous march of an assimilationist Jew to become a successful French officer, trespassing the threshold of tolerance in a bigoted terrain which was to lead him to his calvary. At the age of 35 he was a captain in the French Army and posted to the General Staff. For him, his Judaism was unimportant – for his adversaries it was all important. He did not or would not recognize that admission was not acceptance and thereby became an accomplice to his own martyrdom.

How often did Dreyfus experience expressions of antisemitism and how often did he ignore its warnings? Did he really not realize that he was living in a society in which antisemitism had become part of its fabric? Did he not read Drumont’s rantings which perpetuated the
calumnies levelled at Jews since the dawn of Christianity? Was he not aware of the editorials in *La Libre Parole* warning against their admission into the army? Dreyfus tried to ignore these impediments and paid for his illusions with degradation, imprisonment and exile. And although, in a unique moment of history, the injustice to one Jew became a world affair, its lessons in the vast arena of human rights have remained unlearned.

Rumblings of the Affair continued and do so to this day. The first war passed with its horrors, to be surpassed by the second with its atrocities. Members of the Dreyfus family fought valiantly, served in the Resistance and died, other family members were deported in the transports from Drancy to Auschwitz where they perished. The venomous ‘Death to the Jews’ was transformed into reality.

History and the passage of time have made the Dreyfus Affair a Rorschach test for all those who come into contact with it. It exposes bigotry, hypocrisy and guilt with unnerving clarity. Set in a drama where prejudice prevailed over reason, the victory of justice was finally achieved at the price of great personal suffering and national shame. In its struggle for human rights the Affair reached heroic proportions, and in the writings of Charles Péguy, a mystical dimension.

Dreyfus was exonerated of all the charges against him except that of being a Jew, and in 20 years of research and reflection on the Affair, its most penetrating summary came from a Parisian taxi driver whom I asked what he knew about the Dreyfus Affair: ‘Ah, Monsieur,’ he explained, ‘a strange story. It was all about a French officer who was accused of being Jewish.’