



# Ambassador's Activities

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Speech by *HE* Bernard Emié,  
French Ambassador to the United Kingdom

at the ceremony to award the insignia  
of *Commandeur* in the *Ordre National de la Légion d'Honneur*  
to Theodore Zeldin

London, 17 May 2012

*Cher* Theodore Zeldin,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It's a great honour for me, and for all of us gathered here, to welcome you to the French Residence, surrounded by your family and in the presence of eminent figures, to present you with the insignia of *Commandeur* in the *Ordre National de la Légion d'Honneur*. It's a rare reward, and although this is the fourth time I've held the post of French Ambassador I've seldom had the privilege of awarding such a high distinction.

Of course, France has already honoured you in the past, because she made you a *Commandeur* in the *Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* in 1983.

But today is a particularly solemn occasion, because you are being awarded the insignia of our most prestigious national order – created by Napoleon Bonaparte to reward exceptional services rendered to the French nation – with, moreover, the prestigious rank of *Commandeur*.

How can one measure, therefore, the joy this French ambassador feels at honouring a universal ambassador for France such as you?

An observer who is at once critical and loving, demanding and generous, you are without equal in holding up to us a mirror that accurately reflects both our virtues and our failings. Indeed, you seek meticulously to understand us and to improve not only your compatriots' understanding of the French – and hence our ability to work better together – but also relationships between human beings in general.

Born in Mandatory Palestine to Russian parents who had acquired British citizenship, you were educated in Egypt and then England. After graduating in philosophy, Latin and history from Birkbeck College in London and obtaining a doctorate in modern history from Oxford University (you studied at Christ Church College and St Antony's College, where you later became a fellow and Dean), you devoted your initial research to the Second French Empire and to Emile Ollivier, the architect of that regime's so-called "liberal" phase.

But after this work on the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, you performed what was, at the time, a revolution in the way history was written. Not only did you propose a study of modern France from 1848 to 1945 – a particularly long timeframe – but above all, you approached the political and social study of a country from a fresh perspective: that of its attitudes and culture. It was this innovative approach that led to your masterly work “A History of French Passions”.

If it was something of a turning-point in historical writing in Britain, it caused a sensation in France when it was translated a few years later. Several generations of students, *khâgneux*, historians, ordinary citizens and no doubt politicians too were overjoyed to read “French Passions”, which stood in stark contrast to an official historiography often drawing heavily on Lavisse. You really did reveal to the French a “new 19<sup>th</sup> century” and a new Republic, peopled with figures previously absent from the history books, full of contradictory aspirations and packed full of peculiarities.

Your intimate knowledge of France also came across in your incredible work “The French” – translated, believe it or not, as “Les Français”! –, the fruit of painstaking, in-depth research with individuals and institutions whose cooperation was, understandably, not always easy to secure. You deny the existence of the “average Frenchman”: you delight in our diversity, focusing on our personal and collective lack of confidence and on the way we judge one another. From defenders of Occitan culture to *énarques* – of whom I’m one – via humourists, television presenters, dukes and militant communists in the party schools, you’ve scrutinized our people with a sensitivity and sympathy which – as with the greatest writers – are never an obstacle to a sharp critical sense. You’re no doubt the person from outside France who has best analysed, decoded and understood us. It’s often been through reading you that I’ve found the most pertinent observations on our country and its complexity – observations that are sometimes cruel, always accurate, and also imbued with great friendship and, I would say, almost tenderness.

You’re a great cosmopolitan and lover of the human race, as demonstrated by your “An Intimate History of Humanity”, your charming and brilliant work “Conversation” and your Oxford Muse Foundation.

As in “The French”, you show in “An Intimate History of Humanity” that amazing ability to combine personal testimony with philosophical reflexion which characterizes your work.

Individuals past and present reflect the universality of the human condition and enable you to point the way to the intimate, humanist solutions you've been suggesting for a few years, in order to make this valley of tears, our world, a place where we can hope to live well.

The BBC asked you to give a series of talks devoted to conversation. These sharp, witty texts – published and translated the world over – restored discussions between human beings to their former glory. Not the verbal duels of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century salons, but self-discovery through disinterested verbal interaction with others.

It's also in this spirit that you consider the transformation of human relations, at work or elsewhere, so that everyone can blossom and be of benefit to society. Your foundation, the Oxford Muse Foundation, gives everyone the opportunity to discover conversation, share a “conversation menu” in order to talk to total strangers and encourage them to paint verbal self-portraits. This new Saint-Simonianism, aimed at promoting mutual understanding through conversation, is particularly relevant between people of different nationalities, and particularly French and British people.

Whether it be in this international body of work, in your outstanding contribution as an independent, critical and constructive observer to the commission chaired by Jacques Attali in 2007 on the liberation of French growth – a topical subject if ever there was one – or in your work for the European Commission, you show we can care about the future of work without ever dissociating this issue from the difficult art of being good human beings whose behaviour helps develop harmony around them.

Reading your talks on conversation or visiting the website of your foundation (whose active members are called “muses”!) also provides a chance to discover your artistic talents, because you yourself did the drawings that adorn them.

Let me also take this opportunity to pay tribute to your wife, Deirdre Wilson, who hasn't simply supported and inspired you throughout your career but is herself an eminent linguist, a professor at University College London and co-author of the Theory of Relevance, not unconnected to your own reflexions on the art of conversation.

As a man of many talents, an eminent thinker, a rigorous and subtle historian and a sensitive and caring human being, you're a true scholar, the type of all-round personality who existed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and to whom you're a worthy 21<sup>st</sup>-century heir. Your talents and virtues leave us all humbled and full of admiration.

As an analyst of French passions, *cher* Theodore Zeldin, you've never stopped expressing your passion for France and for nurturing and enhancing the Franco-British relationship, which is unrivalled. You're a major player in our relationship, a mediator between these two countries, which you so love and represent so well. The French President has responded to this lifelong passion by drawing on his personal store of insignia – a special sign of recognition and admiration – to make you *Commandeur* in the *Ordre National de la Légion d'Honneur*.

*Theodore Zeldin, au nom du président de la République et en vertu des pouvoirs qui nous sont conférés, nous vous faisons Commandeur dans l'ordre national de la légion d'Honneur./.*