There is an enduring assumption that the French have never been and will never be liberal. As with all clichés, this one contains a grain of truth, but it also overlooks an important school of thought that has been a constant presence in French intellectual and political culture for nearly three centuries: French political liberalism. In this collaborative volume, a distinguished group of philosophers, political theorists and intellectual historians uncover this unjustly neglected tradition. The chapters examine the nature and distinctiveness of French liberalism, providing a comprehensive treatment of major themes including French liberalism’s relationship with republicanism, Protestantism, utilitarianism and the human rights tradition. Individual chapters are devoted to Montesquieu, Tocqueville, Aron, Lefort and Gauchet, as well as to some lesser-known, yet important, thinkers, including several political economists and French-style ‘neoliberals’. French Liberalism is essential reading for all those interested in the history of political thought.

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FRENCH LIBERALISM FROM MONTESQUIEU TO THE PRESENT DAY

EDITED BY
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The editors of this book would like to acknowledge and thank all those individuals and institutions who made our project possible. It began as a valedictory conference for philosopher André Van de Putte at the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium, organized under the logistic and intellectual auspices of the research group RIPPLE (Research in Political Philosophy Leuven). We would like to express our gratitude to everyone involved in the organization of that conference, and in particular to Kristof Nijssens. Funding, both for the conference and for subsequent work on this book, was generously provided by the Research Foundation Flanders, the K. U. Leuven’s Institute of Philosophy, the K. U. Leuven Research Fund, the Joseph Van de Wiele Foundation and l’Ambassade de France en Belgique. For copyright permissions we are grateful to Ellipses and to Oxford University Press. Darian Meacham deserves our special thanks for skilfully steering this book around many practical and linguistic hurdles. We would also like to recognize Michael Breslin for translating into English the texts by Lucien Jaume, Céline Spector, Jean-Fabien Spitz and Serge Audier. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of cited material in these chapters are the translator’s. In all the other chapters, unless otherwise indicated, all translations of cited material are the author’s or our own. At Cambridge University Press, we are grateful to Richard Fisher for his encouragement and support. Finally, we owe a special debt to Antoon Braeckman, without whose inspiration and tireless efforts this collection of essays would never have seen the light. Throughout the book’s production process we have been extremely happy to count on Antoon’s input and support. Last but not least, we would like to thank all those colleagues who contributed essays to this volume and with whom it has been a pleasure to work.