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, along with 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 unabashed part of the Right. But he earned plaudits for his successful battle to get d’Ormesson at the École Normale Supérieure, or Claude Lévi-Strauss. Art – like life – was supposed to be serious.

But d’Ormesson was relentlessly 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 heavy weight 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 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 mythic and mystical proportions, and the plot is built around his emergence and dramatic demise. There are besides 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 thinking that by using the nearest university library catalogue to look up Noam Chomsky’s Syntactic Structures of the Languages of the Empire or Bertrand Russell’s “now slightly outdated but still classic study”, Herminides and Paracletus, supposedly published by Oxford University Press in 1938.

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”. And, at a deeper level, he challenges 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 relationship to “facts”. But d’Ormesson was neither a leading figure in these discussions, nor a significant historian in his own right. Indeed, he correctly guessed the future direction of debate before the Manichean split in historiography; the central protagonist of his novel. Seen in this light, The Glory of the Empire lives up to its overhyped status with a<span class="redactor-cursor" style="display: inline-block; width: 100%; height: 100%; position: absolute; top: 0px; left: 0px; overflow: hidden;""></span>