

French Agrarian History after 1750 – a Review and Bibliography*

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SINCE the late 1960s, French rural history has flourished as never before. From the village monograph and peasant autobiography to the massive regional *doctorat d'État*, the variety, depth and quality of rural history has been striking. But a prodigious increase in output in recent years has not lessened debate about how the rural world should be analysed. Methodological discussion about the place of agriculture, the importance of industry, and rural-urban linkages coexists with more empirically-based disagreements about the place, character and dynamism of the peasant sector, and the chronology and nature of agricultural modernization.

Such debate typifies the richness of much rural historical writings. As Le Roy Ladurie has noted,¹¹⁰ a new rural history has emerged in recent years. More quantitative and analytical in emphasis, its development has mirrored that of the *Annales* school which has sought a more problem-oriented history employing theory and fostering interdisciplinary interpretations. At the same time it has become increasingly popular with the public. Rural histories and peasant novels have become best-sellers and the images and symbols of rural France have become an integral part of television and cinema output. This review, which includes, where possible, works published in translation, seeks to highlight some of the more important work of the last two decades, work, which, it is argued, typifies the current state of research in French rural history since about 1750.

I

Something of the variety and wealth of agrarian history in France has been evident in recent general works. The four volume *Histoire de la France Rurale*,⁵² published some ten years ago, although at times uneven in the place accorded to interpretation over description, nevertheless provides a valuable and richly-illustrated introduction to the evolution of rural France since the early Middle Ages. Equally, the more substantial volumes of the *Histoire Economique et Sociale de la France*²² provide an excellently documented history of the rural sector and a clear assessment of its links with urban and industrial France. For the doyen of French historians, Braudel, it was rural and agricultural France, with its distinctive *terroirs* and *cultures*, influenced by environment and circumscribed by tradition, that created that particular *Identité de la France* which was the subject of his last book before his death in 1985.²³ General histories by *inter alia* Zeldin,¹⁶⁵ Magraw,¹¹⁶ Price¹⁴⁵ and Forster and Ranum,⁶⁵ have introduced material on French agricultural matters to English audiences.

The often massive *doctorat d'État* remains the basis for much rural historical work. If the place of these multi-volume works, usually anchored in a particular region, has been the subject of some debate within French academic circles, there can be little doubt that they continue to form the core of much agrarian history. The recent theses of Rinaudo on the Var,¹⁴⁵ Hubscher on the Nord,⁸⁸ Mayaud on the Doubs,¹¹⁹ Mesliand on the Vaucluse,¹²⁵ Garrier on the Beaujolais⁷¹ and Gavignaud on Roussillon⁷³ have

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focused on the agricultural and rural economy in its regional context. Such work, in conjunction with the classic monographs of historians and geographers from earlier periods, has given the historian of rural France a depth and richness of regional work which the British historian might well envy. These monographs, particularly where they move beyond narrow departmental confines and past the temporal divide of the Great War, have a descriptive and analytical depth which reflects the nature of the French doctoral system. As Table 1 shows, this corpus of regional work constitutes a rich reservoir of material for the agrarian historian researching on both regional and systematic themes, although that coverage remains somewhat uneven.

Alongside these larger monographs, the local study, usually centred on a particular village, has continued to form a major part of rural historical output. Large scale interdisciplinary projects, organized under the auspices of the CNRS, have produced volumes on the Aubrac²⁷ and Brittany^{26, 129} which include important historical sections, whilst village studies by Higgonet,⁸⁵ Rosenberg,¹⁴⁸ Ackerman¹ and Zonabend¹⁶⁶ have sought to move beyond what Morineau¹³² saw as the limited antiquarian focus of much local history in France.

TABLE 1
Major regional monographs and theses

Region	Author (Date)
North/East	Dion-Salitot (1972); Frélaud (1983); Hubscher (1979); Juillard (1953); Pinchemel (1957)
West	Bois (1960); Burguière (1977); Dallas (1982); Desert (1975); Dupeux (1962); Frémont (1967); Julien-Labruyère (1982); Morin (1971); Tilly (1964);
Centre	Bêteille (1974); Bonnamour (1966); Corbin (1974); Durand (1946); Durand (1979); Garrier (1973); Marres (1935); Meynier (1931); Jones (1985)
South	Agulhon (1982); Barral (1962); Dugrand (1963); Fabre and Lacroix (1973); Gavignaud (1983); Judt (1979); Le Roy Ladurie (1974); Livet (1962)

II

At the base of work on the agricultural economy under the *ancien régime* has been the evolution of the landscape itself. As Clout has noted,³⁸ work on landscape history has been rather less prolific in France than in Great Britain; indeed, until the recent volume by Pitte¹⁴¹ there was no single survey of the history of the French urban and rural landscape. In recent years, however, an increased interest in the cultural morphology of landscape can be detected. If the earlier works of Flatrès^{61, 62} were important in highlighting the history of particular landscape features (most notably the *bocage* landscape of western France), more recent studies have attempted a broader view of the landscape. In conjunction with more traditional reviews of landscape gardening² and interdisciplinary work on the *bocage*^{93, 126} an emphasis on the relationships, both physical and symbolic, between *paysan* and *paysage* can be detected in work by Bertrand,¹³ Deffontaines,⁴⁷ and Cloarec.³⁷ Such developments are likely to press the exploration of the iconography of the landscape in ways similar to that in Britain through seeking to interpret the morphology and social meaning of different landscape types.

Alongside such work an interest in the cultural geography of the landscape continues to be expressed in work on rural vernacular architecture. At a time of increasing concern about the heritage, detailed work on rural house types^{70, 120, 121} has emphasized the richness and complexity of regional building traditions. The built-form of the countryside, especially in its functional structures, can, it is argued, be 'read' in the same way as the landscape itself.

The degree to which *blé*, that catch-all term to describe wheat of all hues and colours, dominated the economy of the *ancien régime*, has been emphasized in an important paper by Mulliez.¹³³ It was the constant necessity to produce wheat for

the market in order to raise tax revenue which, he argued, was a potent factor in preventing strong regional specialization well into the nineteenth-century. This view of a series of largely autarkic regional peasant economies accords with that of Goubert, whose two translated volumes provide a classic introduction to the period.^{75, 76} Diversity of agricultural techniques and productions also underlined the work of Faucher⁵⁹ who, in an influential set of papers, emphasized the complexity of regional economies. The work of Forster⁶⁴ and Morineau¹³⁰ posed the question of the extent of dynamism within the agricultural economy in the eighteenth-century; a more recent paper by Hickey⁸⁴ examined the question in relation to the Dauphiné region, stressing once more the importance of variations in regional growth rates, first identified by Toutain.¹⁵⁹ Such diversity is splendidly shown in Clout's examination of agricultural structures in the early decades of the nineteenth-century.³⁹ Comparisons between Britain and France, a chronic historiographical feature since the time of Arthur Young, have been the subject of a book by O'Brien and Keyder¹³⁵ in which the character of the agricultural economy is judiciously considered.

Alongside such work, the traditional structures of the economy have continued to receive attention. The reliance of the southern economy on the chestnut, the staple diet of the poorer peasant family, was stressed by Bruneton-Governatori²⁵ whilst Pitte¹⁴² has documented the place of the chestnut in the European economy generally with particular attention to French examples. Work by Brisebarre²⁴ considered the place of transhumance in the southern economy whilst a pioneering paper by Molinier and Molinier-Meyer¹²⁸ has examined the place of the wolf in the economy and ethnology of early modern France.

If, in comparison with the nineteenth-

century, work on the agricultural economy of this period has been somewhat sparse, the same cannot be said of village social structures. The nature of *ancien régime* society has been fundamental to the historiography of the Revolution and such interest has spawned a considerable body of work on social themes. Whilst a detailed consideration of revolutionary history is beyond the confines of the present paper, the place of the peasantry is reviewed in *inter alia* Hunt⁹² and Soboul.¹⁵¹ From the wealth of regional studies on the Revolution, one can note the contributions of Le Goff and Sutherland on Brittany,¹⁰⁶ Gauthier on the Picardy region⁷² and the volume edited by Lucas and Lewis,¹¹⁴ each stressing the difficulties of postulating common patterns of rural protest in diverse regions. The work of Cobb,⁴¹ always sensitive and provocative, remains central to an understanding of the complex relationships between town and country in a period of political turmoil.

The nature of the rural community, its structures, geographical variations and mentalities have been considered by Jones.^{94, 95} His critical examination of the way in which the notion of community has been employed by historians and geographers has highlighted both the extent of local variations in communal loyalties and the unifying role of the Church. Gutton⁸² has similarly focused on the meaning of community whilst work on the place of religion in rural society by Jones,⁹⁶ Cholvy³⁰ and Tackett¹⁵⁴ has been important in highlighting its central role which continued into the twentieth century.

The place of migration within the community has been a continuing theme in historical work. Regional studies by Bételle¹⁴ and Corbin⁴³ emphasized the importance of seasonal and temporary migration in permitting overcrowded rural communities to rid themselves of excess mouths during the hungry season. Patterns

established during the *ancien régime* were reinforced when permanent exodus began in the early nineteenth-century. Such linkages have been examined by Pitie¹⁴⁰ and Chatelain²⁹ whilst the work of Hufton⁹¹ provides a comprehensive and sensitive overview of both poverty and the migration patterns it created during this period, distinguishing a cottage-bound north and east from an essentially restless and rootless south and west.

III

Between the Revolution and the Great War the economy and social structure of rural France was dramatically transformed. For Weber,¹⁶² this change from *Peasants into Frenchmen* resulted from the effect of a trilogy of factors: military service, compulsory education and improvements in communications. If critics have sometimes disputed the model of modernization espoused by Weber¹¹⁶ few disagree about the profundity of change, and about the wider significance of his work.

It can be argued that the debate about peasant France engendered both by Weber and Duby and Wallon⁵² has obscured the real progress of capitalist agriculture. The image of a small, owner-occupied peasant sector was at odds with many parts of France where a highly capitalized, rented farm sector existed. Clout's reconstructions of the agricultural geography of early nineteenth-century France indicate the highly developed agriculture of areas such as north and north-eastern France, the Beauce and parts of eastern France.³⁹ Such trends had been reinforced by the end of the century – again Clout's painstaking work makes clear the wide disparities in agricultural structures and productivity on the eve of the Great War.⁴⁰ For the start of this period of change, Lepetit's detailed reconstruction of the major economic zones in 1830 represents a noteworthy attempt to quantify economic development

using multivariate analysis.¹⁰⁷ He distinguishes five main zones of economic development centred on the north and east. As Hohenberg argues,⁸⁶ rural France was far from being stagnant in mid-century – many areas had highly active property markets and had embarked on radical technical changes. Grantham⁷⁷ and Newell¹³⁴ have also made clear that parts of France did experience radical agricultural revolutions (increased property size, mechanization, the elimination of the fallow) although both note that the lack of demographic growth may have inhibited market expansion and the full development of a market-oriented agriculture.

Work on particular aspects of the agricultural economy is typified by the paper of Heffer *et al*⁸³ which provides a detailed reconstruction of the conditions of production and marketing of wheat. Such work needs to be extended to other products in the production system in order to build on the pioneer work on Augé-Laribé.⁴ Viticulture has, not surprisingly, received attention. Gavignaud⁷³ has examined both the structures of production in Roussillon and the sometimes vexed relationship between *viticulteur* and the State. The trauma of the phylloxera epidemic has been considered by Ordish,¹³⁷ with Stevenson¹⁵² providing detail for the case of *Hérault*. The character and transformation of pastoral economies in the south is discussed by Cleary.³⁵ Finally, the end-product of production, consumption and the resultant dietary patterns, is dealt with by Mennell¹²³ for the better-off classes and Bonnain-Moerdijk¹⁸ for the peasantry.

The nature of property units has been a central theme in historical work. The *Histoire Economique et Sociale*²² provides a detailed reconstruction of the geography of property units with diversity the main theme. From the large, well-capitalized rented farm of the north, to the sharecropping farm of central France to the small peasant holdings of the south-west, this

diversity almost defies generalization. But two important papers by Hubscher^{89, 90} have sought to define more precisely the character of farm units and to explain their persistence by a more rigorous discussion of how farms actually functioned economically. Attention to the detailed material in farm account books is beginning to dispel a number of myths about the technical backwardness and capital shortages of French farms. Finally, the importance of salaried workers in agriculture, often the first to flee to urban and industrial employment has been examined by Grebouw.⁷⁸

The relationship between agriculture and other sectors of the economy is touched upon in the general econometric history of Levy-Leboyer and Bourguignon,¹¹² although their approach has not been without its critics.¹⁵³ The relationship between agriculture and migration, a central theme in a number of regional monographs,^{14, 43, 49} has also been examined by Winchester¹⁶³, whilst Ogden¹³⁶ saw migration as the prime force behind the collapse of traditional peasant society. Patterns of migration, their chronology and geography, have been well documented by Pitić¹⁴⁰ and Merlin.¹²⁴ For Price,¹⁴⁴ the role of the railways in stimulating agricultural change was fundamental — it was the improvement in communications from mid-century which acted as a catalyst for two closely-related trends to take effect, the disappearance of food shortages and the onset of agricultural specialization. The place of industry in the countryside is also beginning to receive the attention it deserves. As Rinaudo¹⁴⁷ has convincingly demonstrated, occupational diversity was fundamental to the peasant economy with people moving from one job to another on a temporary or seasonal basis. Such diversity was threatened as large-scale industrialization undermined rural artisans and industry.

To what extent were such economic transformations reflected in changes in the fabric of rural life? Research on the social,

cultural and political character of village life has multiplied in the last decade or so. Education has increasingly been seen as fundamental to economic change. The problems of peasant literacy in the pre-Revolutionary period are considered by Siddle.¹⁵⁰ The classic volume of Thabault identified the development of a coherent, compulsory schooling system from the 1860s as the key factor in helping the economic and social transformation of Deux-Sèvres.¹⁵⁶ The text of Furet and Ozouf⁶⁹ provides an excellent introduction to the debate about the effectiveness of legislation, the intentions of the legislators and the geography of schooling and literacy. Such work has been extended by Grew, Harrigan and Whitney⁸⁰ who have introduced more precise definitions of schooling density into their spatial analysis. The often parlous standards of the teachers themselves are entertainingly described by Day⁴⁵ using the reports sent in by teachers themselves to a government enquiry of the 1860s. The relationships between agricultural structures, settlement patterns, political affiliation and literacy provide challenging research problems for those interested in the character and modernization of rural France at the turn of the century.

The role of military service, seen by Weber as fundamental to the process of economic change, remains curiously under-researched. Whilst the military records themselves have been extensively used by historians (eg, 161) because of the information they contain on the size, degree of education, and physical condition of conscripts, work on the experience of that service remains to be done. Yet the uprooting of peasants for military service or the experience of life in the trenches of the Great War cannot but have helped reshape mentalities and attitudes and widened the horizons of the typical *poilu*. Peasant autobiographies (eg, 79) hint at such influences.

The way in which the peasant com-

munity was organized has been an important theme in recent research. The strength of the French tradition of rural sociology has meant that the role of individuals and association in organizing the rural community has been much studied. As Francois and Reichardt⁶⁶ have argued, a wide range of groupings, both formal and informal, structured the rural community. For both Barral⁹ and Houée⁸⁷ the place of economic and social organizations (the agricultural cooperative and syndicate, the rural bank) was central in the transformation of rural France. Work on syndicates and their place in economic and political change has been carried out by Baker,^{5, 6, 7} Berger¹² and Cleary.^{33, 34} Mutual-aid groups (for insuring animals, houses and individuals) and the development of agricultural credit, crucial for the break-up of peasant routine, have been examined by Gueslin.⁸¹ Such studies reveal both the development of national networks of provision and their importance in the local context.

The Church, a central component of rural society, has, not surprisingly attracted considerable attention. The pioneering work of Boulard²⁰ has been developed by Le Bras.¹⁰⁵ His 1976 volume provides a useful summary of the work of religious sociologists whilst Launay¹⁰³ has considered the place and character of the clergy in the nineteenth-century. Jones⁹⁶ has detailed the way in which religion shaped the collective conscience of countless rural communities for whom the pulpit was the mouthpiece of village loyalties. Yet parts of France were strongly anticlerical; such tendencies emerged with vigour after the separation of Church and State in 1905. Nor did religion imply the triumph of rationalism. As Devlin⁵⁰ makes clear, the roots of superstition ran deep in the French countryside, usually blending with religion to provide a reservoir of ritual and belief.

The notion of community, its tensions and alliances, has also been an important

theme in work on the politicization of the peasantry. Whilst Weber was right to insist that peasant political behaviour must be viewed in its often highly localized context, such an interpretation should not obscure the extent to which political behaviour in the peasant community is explicable in national terms. As Berenson¹¹ notes, to reduce politics to the local and parochial is to deny that the peasantry could make rational political choices. The work of Agulhon³ has convincingly demonstrated that highly sophisticated political alignments were part of the southern tradition. Similarly Judt⁹⁷ has forcefully argued that the historian should not dismiss the rural environment as being outside conventional political analysis. The concept of economic and social modernization employed by Weber cannot be divorced from a analysis of political alignments and choices which were central to the peasant community.

IV

In some respects the First World War continues to represent a kind of barrier beyond which historical work all too rarely ventures. Yet it was in the inter-war period that the image of a peasant France, centred on the family farm, accorded most closely with reality. Massive outmigration in that period led to an improvement in the position of many farmers, able, thanks to post-war inflation, to pay off their debts and acquire new land.^{22, 101} Debate about the extent to which protectionism acted as a brake on technical progress in farming continues to animate historical work.

The extent of agricultural innovation again varied markedly from one region to another as monographs by Mesliand,¹²⁵ Gavignaud⁷³ and Garrier⁷¹ make clear. For most observers the thirty years after the war (a period usually referred to as the *Trente Glorieuses* c.1945–1973) were ones of unrivalled growth and modernization in

the farm economy, cut short only by the energy crisis of the mid-1970s and government retrenchment in the early 1980s. If the impact of change in the peasant sector has been relatively well studied (eg, 32) there is a continuing paucity of work on the more advanced farming regions, especially the north and north-west, where capitalist farming was making major strides. The recent *140 cartes sur la France rurale*⁴² identifies some of the geographical dimensions of those changes whilst Mendras¹²² provides the classic account of the final disappearance of the peasantry as the social and economic structures of that community were broken under the wheel of capitalist progress.

The nature of agricultural innovation and the new dimensions of rural France are considered by Bodiguel¹⁵,¹⁶ and Chapuis.²⁸ Cleary³⁶ has examined the organizations of rural France post-1918 and their responses to the progress of capitalist agriculture, whilst Maresca¹¹⁷ focused upon the actors in the drama; her analysis of peasant leaders draws on detailed autobiographical material. Gueslin's work on the *Crédit Agricole* continues to remind the researcher of the vital importance of credit in agricultural modernization.⁸¹ The place of agriculture under the Vichy regime is examined in detail by Boussard.²¹ Personal testimonies to the rapidity of change in rural France are to be found in Debatisse⁴⁶ and Forget⁶³ whilst the new face of agriculture is well described by Klatzmann¹⁰² and Chombart de Lauwe.³¹ Kayser¹⁰⁰ has provided a valuable summary of this 'new' rural France, increasingly distanced from its agricultural base, and more reliant on the service sector than the farm.

V

What then, is the current state of health of rural historical writing in France? If one considers the range, diversity and depth of output it is undoubtedly good. Writings

on both regional and systematic themes continue to further insight into the way in which the agricultural economy functioned in the past, into rural social structures and into the nature of economic and social change in the village. With *La fin des paysans*, interest in agricultural and rural history has if anything intensified.

A diverse focus of interests continues to characterize output. Work on the more traditional areas of agricultural history — tools and techniques for example — has tended to fade in recent years. It has perhaps been replaced with a sharper focus on the social fabric of farming. The emergence of capitalist agriculture, its character and methods, and the patterns (both temporal and spatial) of its diffusion occupy much space in the literature. Paradoxically, such a trend, reinforced through the strong interdisciplinary links which characterize history in France, is likely to turn researchers back towards a more critical, and regionally differentiated examination of agricultural techniques and methods. Equally important has been the shift in focus amongst rural historians from specifically agricultural to more rural questions. The place of artisanal and small-scale industrial production is being given increased weight particularly through the growing recognition of the place of part-time farming in this century.

Other new foci of interest include the area of state-farming relationships and the character of agricultural groups such as cooperatives, syndicates and banks. As government intervention in farming (symbolized by the famous Méline protectionist tariffs of the 1880s, but certainly pre-dating that legislation) has developed, the importance of the political economy of agriculture has become apparent. The complex relationships between the state, farming organizations and political parties constitute an increasingly significant area of research interest.

As historical interests cross the barrier

of 1914 it is likely that the questions which preoccupy contemporary social scientists – the disappearance of the peasantry, the character of capitalist agriculture, the development of a non-agricultural rural sector – will serve to illuminate aspects of the rural past. The boundaries between the historical and contemporary are in any case mere disciplinary niceties. It would be encouraging indeed to think that Marc Bloch's dictum about the present being the key to the past holds truer today than when he first wrote his *French Rural History* in 1931.

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