

History & Archaeology

From Below & Above

French History, Anglo-Saxon Attitudes—By DOUGLAS JOHNSON

IN A RECENT Yearbook of Urban History, four historians from the University of Lancaster urged their colleagues to put their trust in groups. It is vanity, they claim, for any one man to imagine that he can provide an adequate account of a large city. Is this so? If it is, then the principle must be applied to a good many other aspects of history, and amongst the multitude of historians must be numbered those British and American historians who, without resort to group work, are concerning themselves with the complexities and controversies of French history. In spite of its difficulties, and dangers, the popularity of French history is considerable, and it is striking to contrast the number of British and Americans working on this subject with the relatively few French scholars who have turned to British or American history. With a few honourable exceptions the French appear to have lost the tradition of Guizot, Elie Halévy and Petit-Dutaillis.

If one were to try to generalise about the British and American approach to French history one would probably suggest a common characteristic. Most of these historians are not only attempting to study some precisely defined area of the French past, they are usually trying to relate it to the wider problems of French history and to some deeper explanation of the nature of change in French society. Perhaps the British and Americans have profited from the fact that they did not have to produce the massive French doctoral thesis, which, until recently at least, was at the centre of most historical research in France and which obliged its authors to expatiate in boundless detail on a particular subject. At all events they have had a tendency to be more interpretative, and perhaps to be bolder in pointing to more general conclusions. This is in contrast to earlier British historians, and observers, who were more dependent on the work of

French scholars and who often confined their own attitudes to a disapproval of many of the events and of what was sometimes called the "unfraternal" tradition of French history (a favourite quotation was that attributed to Metternich, who said that fraternity as it was practised in France had led him to the conclusion that if he had a brother he would call him cousin). Even such a sympathetic observer as J. E. C. Bodley, writing his account of France at the end of the 19th century, was struck by the presence in the Luxembourg Palace of a picture showing the death of the young Barra in the Vendéen war. This, for him, was not only a sign of the blood-stained records of the Republic, it was also a sign of French officialdom wishing to demonstrate that the French past was filled with examples of how the French had been cruel to the French: "*Gallus Gallo lupus*" as he put it.

Such fastidiousness no longer exists among British scholars, and indeed it seems likely that British and American historians can achieve a greater objectivity than do some of their French counterparts. In the study of the French Revolution, for example, whereas it remains customary for French historians to dispose themselves in camps which, roughly speaking, reflect their attitudes towards the Revolution rather than their interests in particular aspects of it, such alignments would scarcely be feasible among British or American scholars.

ALL HISTORIANS THESE DAYS are ambitious to add new dimensions to the well-established features of their craft, and one common feature of this is to explore history from below, to recover and reconstruct the world of the undocumented and inarticulate. This is occurring in the work on French history, and amongst the books which have been published over the last twelve months, there are two outstanding examples. Natalie Zemon Davis, in her eight studies of popular attitudes and mentalities, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*,¹ tells us that she has a

¹ *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*. By NATALIE ZEMON DAVIS. Duckworth, £9.80; Stanford University Press, \$12.50.

continuous concern with the lives of those who are "modest." Olwen Hufton, in *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France, 1750-1789*,² asks who were the poor, why they were there, and which areas faced the greater challenge of poverty. But this concern, and this questioning, is not an end in itself, and both writers, dealing with that section of the population that was numerically outstandingly important in the societies which they are studying, relate their investigation to issues which affect the general understanding of history.

Thus Professor Davis, when she writes about the print-workers in Lyon and their reactions to Protestantism, is discussing the sort of social experience which could help form Protestant consciousness among male artisans. She emphasises the confidence which the print-workers felt in their work as artisans, and it is this, rather than any significant correlation between socio-economic position and religion which is important. We probably do not need to be told that when skilled workers sang psalms in the streets, they were not trying to win higher wages. There was no apparent connection between their attempts to better themselves professionally and their choice of religion. If one considers how certain occupations appear to have been over-represented in the Protestant movement relative to their distribution in the population as a whole, then one finds that it is the *métiers* where skills were involved, or in which there was innovation and novelty, such as printing or goldsmith's work, which were attracted towards Protestantism. This is because these distinctive skills, and she includes literacy amongst them, facilitated men's consciousness (she uses the word "observation") of religious matters; because as groups many of these artisans had travelled fairly widely and were cosmopolitan; and because they were living in the city of Lyon, which had a long lay tradition and such a tradition of rebellion that the term for popular revolt in Lyon had a special name (*rebeine*). It was for these reasons, and in these circumstances, that the print-workers and their masters opted for Protestantism.

But the story does not end there. Subsequently they found Calvinism too severe, and they resented the fact that the Consistory objected to many of their customs; indeed, to the very close-knit nature of their organised group. Hence it was that they returned, if somewhat lukewarmly, to the Catholic Church (possibly influenced too by the evidence that this Church was showing remarkable strength). We are shown an episode in religious history, and one which in French terms is particularly interesting because it des-

cribes how a group created a communal relationship among themselves. In other essays, when she is writing about youth groups, about violence as a form of social behaviour, about the forms of poverty which were considered admissible, about women in urban environments, Professor Davis is also pointing to the complex social structure, with its many different kinds of power, cohesion and hierarchy.

IT COULD BE that Professor Davis is too apt to impose a sociological concept upon the lower orders of 16th-century France, and perhaps she admits this implicitly when she says that historians of popular culture do not respect the way people lived, and in that sense have difficulty in understanding them. Professor Hufton cannot be criticised in the same way. Possibly because she has greater archival resources, she is able to let the people speak for themselves. But her conclusion is one of astonishment that the poor were able to survive at all, and it is when she is surveying the many expedients devised by the poor in their struggle to exist (and she writes about vagrancy, theft, prostitution, smuggling, child abandonment) that she comes across the link between festivity and violence. Perhaps French historians have been reluctant to examine the problem of violence (although there have been some exceptions) because they have preferred to depict violence as if it were the product of the Revolution, or because they do not wish to show the future sovereign people of the 18th century in an unworthy light.

The most common interpretation of the Revolution to find its way into history textbooks still remains the class interpretation, and for that reason one form of popular violence is acceptable, that is to say the grain or food riot. But Professor Hufton prefers to see beyond this. She writes about the ritual which surrounded a meaningless, gratuitous violence, and about "the ingrained violence of the working classes." There were some areas where the authorities claimed that they were fully occupied simply keeping the peace between rival gangs at fairs, and it would appear that if the fearsome life of the poor was accompanied by a compulsive desire to celebrate on public holidays, *Fête*-days and other occasions for gathering together, then these celebrations were accompanied by violent confrontations of the young. One village would attack another, the young men sometimes walking long distances in order to do so. This was a sport which could result in severe injury, and even in loss of life, and the families of those who had been mutilated or killed could claim compensation in the courts; but villagers would never give evidence against their own, and, as the author puts it, the usual

² *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France, 1750-1789*. By OLWEN HUFTON. Oxford University Press, £9.00, \$29.00.

practice was to seek revenge on the next occasion. Violence in the towns was different. If for the farm workers violence was part of the ritual of holiday, and if for the rural poor it was by force rather than by litigation that they could defend themselves and their rights, in the towns the traditional village feuds and faction fights tended to become meaningless as old loyalties were blurred, the force of the law was nearer, the young did not always have leisure, or, if they did, had more ways of enjoying themselves. But both in the countryside and in the town, Professor Hufton shows us in the poor a whole population which has established its own codes of behaviour, its own sets of interests, loyalties and tolerance.

IN HIS LATEST BOOK, *Paris and its Provinces, 1792-1802*,³ Richard Cobb also lets the documents speak for themselves, and continues to reject any attempt to impose some quantitative or sociological framework on his free-ranging account of travelling into and out of Paris (although he does deal with other themes, this is the principal thread to his work). When one reflects on such a book as this, one is struck by the distance which separates this sort of approach from that of most French scholars. The distinction is not one of erudition, although Professor Cobb's knowledge of the archival resources for certain periods of French Revolution must remain unequalled, but it is rather that he is able to enjoy his history and to be seen enjoying it. He revels in the dramatic, the picturesque and the individual, and captures them from the archives. In contrast the predominant French approach to the Revolution, and one which has influenced most historians at some time, is one which insists on clarity. Starting from the premise that the Revolution was one of the great turning points in the history of mankind, believing that it has to take its place in the evolution from feudalism to capitalism, and convinced that it was the culmination of a long social, economic and political development, French historians invoke important social forces and point to a series of general crises in order to explain such a vital event. The greatness of the happening must be accompanied by appropriately great causes and consequences, even when one makes allowance for the trivial and the accidental. The emphasis is on the need to establish with rigorous clarity events which must be treated as portentous.

But this is not Professor Cobb's view. It is as if he has chosen to forget about the importance of the moment, for he cultivates the small

³ *Paris and its Provinces, 1792-1802*. By RICHARD COBB. Oxford University Press, £5.25, \$17.50.



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occurrence, the *fait divers*, the everyday happening. He is not concerned with the dialectics of revolution; he prefers to think of the adventure of people on the road, their hopes, fears, opportunities. It is as if he transforms his people into Gidéen characters, in search of the unknown. The categories are endless, as he tells us about men who are hoping to seduce women, women hoping for a profitable encounter with some wealthy cattle dealer, about the groups of travellers (fish merchants for example) whose journeys are regular occurrences and who have to come to agreements with the authorities. An individual is assassinated, a number of travellers in a coach have a quarrel and there is a law-suit (he is one of the first historians to use conversation as historical evidence), rural people show their hatred of strangers, Parisians shiver with apprehension as they look on the world of savagery which lies beyond the familiar areas of their city. We are shown banditry as being the expression of geographical facts, the frontier districts which surround every city as being the meeting-places of endless uncertainties and confusions. We are a long way from those who explain causes and consequences with neatness and clarity. The only conclusion is that habit can accustom people to almost everything. But the reader is wiser as well as being better informed.

IN ANOTHER SPHERE, British historians have been in the vanguard of one of the most fruitful developments in the study of French history. This has come from the realisation that it is the regions and the provinces which are of outstanding importance in any consideration of the Ancien Régime, or of Revolutionary France. French historians used to interpret the Revolution as an affirmation of the French nation and they used to scrutinise most closely those events which took place in Paris. This has changed; regional history has become respectable as historians have realised that a basic theme to revolutionary government is the nature of relations between Paris and the provinces, between the central administrators and the people. In these circumstances it has become natural to turn to the great urban centres which grew so rapidly in the course of the 18th century.

Bordeaux, for example, was a town which had acquired wealth and commercial success, it was a significant political centre, and it was an economic agglomeration which was unusually sensitive to change and crisis. A group of talented local scholars have been working on this history, but it is noticeable that two important studies have recently appeared in English. William Doyle, with *The Parlement of Bordeaux and the End of*

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the *Old Régime, 1771-1790*,⁴ has produced the first socio-political analysis in depth, and in *Society and Politics in Revolutionary Bordeaux* Alan Forrest has written the first overall examination of the city's politics in terms of the Revolution.⁵ Both point to the particular nature of Bordeaux within the national framework. The possession of a parlement was a great source of regional pride, and in a city where the legal profession must have formed a tightly knit fraternity numbering several thousand, then everything that concerned the rights of the region against centralised government, and everything that concerned the complicated legal procedures that surrounded local traditions and privileges, was the subject of acute interest.

IT IS DR DOYLE'S contention that it is precisely this local consciousness and these purely local loyalties which endowed the parlement's position with strength. But equally this was the reason which explains the wider failure of the parlements to evolve an effective political philosophy or system. They reacted defensively to a government which was determined on reform, and this defence, made up of expedients rather than principles and of local solutions to problems which existed on a national scale, was a measure of a failure in the prevailing political culture. Dr Forrest, in his book, emphasises the continuity of events in Bordeaux and describes a revolution which was moderate and conservative. Only in the Federalist revolt of 1793 does he find the lawyers and merchants ready to rebel and to break the law. But again, this was not because of any adherence to a coherent philosophy, whether counter-revolutionary or monarchist, but because of local conditions and because of a particular way of viewing these conditions. It is clear, whether we are dealing with the violent crimes, usually contained and dealt with within the local community, or whether we are talking about the notabilities who were in charge of their cities, that the impact and the shock of a centralised authority was greater than historians have allowed for. Among two of the orthodoxies of French historical writing, the one seeing the rise of Robespierre as a largely natural and inevitable process, the other seeing it as the result of some sort of accidental *déravage*, these two accounts of society and politics in Bordeaux suggest a different sort of reality.

⁴ *The Parlement of Bordeaux and the End of the Old Régime, 1771-1790*. By WILLIAM DOYLE. Ernest Benn, £8.75; St Martin's Press, \$21.95.

⁵ *Society and Politics in Revolutionary Bordeaux*. By ALAN FORREST. Oxford University Press, £8.00, \$25.75.

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THE PERIOD OF THE DIRECTORY has been neglected for a long time. It was convenient to consider French history after the death of Robespierre either as a betrayal of the ideals of the Year II, or as a corrupt and disheartening prelude to Bonapartism and the Empire. This attitude is in process of being revised, and British and American historians have played an important part in renewing the study of the period. This is only fitting, since it was a British historian who was among the first, more than 40 years ago, to attack the myth of the Directory's weakness and venality. Martin Lyons, in *France under the Directory*,⁶ specifically states that he is continuing the process of demystification which was started by Goodwin, and he sets out to study the Thermidorean and Directorial régimes in their own right; while M. J. Sydenham, in *The First French Republic, 1792-1804*,⁷ consciously rebels against the habit of abruptly ending the history of the Revolution in 1794 or in 1795.

Neither of these books is the result of the sort of research which distinguishes the work of the

historians to whom reference has already been made, but the interpretations are none the less important. To terminate the history of the Revolution with the death of Robespierre is to suppose, implicitly at least, that what the Revolution was about is to be studied in the years 1792 to 1794, and is to suggest that there were a number of revolutionaries in France who had certain specific aims and that the history of these years is that of their attempting to achieve these aims. As Professor Sydenham puts it, there is no reason why either the period before 1792 or the period after 1794 should not be equally revealing about the real nature of the Revolution.

It is true that the Directory is one of these régimes which suffers from the ease with which one identifies its enemies and the difficulty of defining its supporters. It is also a régime which enjoyed various successes in the field of legislation which can be pointed out, and which exists with a certain perspective in French history because some of its characteristics were reproduced in the Second and Third Republics, but which nevertheless was unsuccessful. It was overthrown by a military coup, and no historian can deny that the advent of Napoleon Bonaparte went a long way to transforming the scene. But the idea is gaining ground, and both these historians echo it, that the 18 Brumaire was not the real turning point. The transition from Directory to Consulate is one which emphasises continuity. It is the advent of the Empire which constitutes the real break, or at all events it is Bonaparte's success in governing arbitrarily from the end of 1801.

Perhaps British historians find it easier to appreciate the Directory than do their French counterparts. An imperfect parliamentary régime which saw a bourgeois élite resume its authority, a determination to protect property rights, and the hope that the gains of revolution could be guaranteed by a narrowly based political oligarchy—all have a certain familiarity. Martin Lyons writes about the wide inequalities of wealth which the Directory tolerated, and his chapter on "*les maigres*" shows how famine, inflation and the collapse of public charitable institutions aggravated the miseries of the poor. Professor Sydenham writes particularly about the internal conflicts within the ruling political class, its distrust of the electorate and the way in which it offended many of its supporters by illegalities. It could be that in the future British historians will also follow up those aspects which have been shown to be important in the earlier periods and examine the Directory's attempt to come to terms with the political realities of the provinces (all the more so because a number of French historians have written on individual departments during the period of the Directory).

⁶ *France under the Directory*. By MARTIN LYONS. Cambridge University Press, £7.90, paper £2.50; \$22.50, paper \$6.95.

⁷ *The First French Republic, 1792-1804*. By M. J. SYDENHAM. Batsford, £5.00; University of California Press, \$13.00.

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Such a study would be in the tradition of Cobb, Doyle and Forrest.

BEFORE LEAVING the subject of the Revolution, and bearing in mind the French reputation for producing outstanding works of *haute vulgarisation*, it is appropriate to point to a short, illustrated history which surveys the whole field from 1789 to 1799 and which probably betters in clarity and good sense any similar publication. Norman Hampson is well-known for his studies of the Enlightenment and Robespierre, and *The French Revolution: A Concise History*⁸ is well in the tradition of British historians when he examines the myths which surround this movement. Not a great blood-letting, not the destroyer of the nobility, not the transformation from one sort of economic power to another: the Revolution was none of these things. He describes it rather as an episode which put an end to a way of life, but which was essentially the appeal, by revolutionaries, to a set of principles which they believed to be universal. Thus the Revolution was vital for France, for Europe and for the Atlantic world.

WHEN ONE GOES BEYOND the Revolution into the 19th century, then the historian is freed from the need to understand a gigantic series of gigantic events but faced with the problem of unravelling a series of paradoxes. The French state is strong, but fragile; revolution is frequently invoked, but regularly avoided or reversed; nationalism is a constant force, but social and ideological differences within the nation have multiplied; economic progress has taken place, but without modifying the centralised, bureaucratic authority of the state; foreign policy is important, and is linked to the process of enhancing national self-esteem, but for post-Napoleonic France, wars were either difficult or unsuccessful. British and American historians,

considering the problems which arise from these paradoxes, can of course use their well-tryed and customary methods of estimating and explaining this interplay of tradition and change. Roger Price in *The Economic Modernisation of France, 1730-1880*,⁹ sees certain aspects of the economy as determining the essential nature of French society. Rigid social structures, local particularisms, archaic economic techniques—all survived as a result of poor communications, which prevented the creation of large markets and competitive pressures. But with the railway revolution, according to Mr Price, this compartmentalisation, which was the fundamental characteristic of the ancien régime, began to disappear. Possibly Mr Price underestimates the resistance to change, which helps to make some of the paradoxes, and one should turn to the more detailed case study of the glass workers, who experienced the full effects of social and economic transformation as their trade turned from being skilled, and somewhat isolated, to being semi-skilled and politically militant. An American historian, Joan Wallach Scott has carefully reconstructed the experience of these men in her book *The Glassworkers of Carmaux*.¹⁰

BUT THERE ARE NEW and more experimental methods of writing history. Thomas D. Beck, in his *French Legislators, 1800-1834*,¹¹ has carried out an exercise in quantitative history in order to analyse the composition of the lower house of the French Parliament, and to show how the political situation became transformed as new generations, new groups of professions, and new élites came into power. Charles Tilly, and his relatives who have concerned themselves with Italy and Germany, has studied collective action in *The Rebellious Century, 1830-1930*,¹² and has come to the conclusion that large social changes which have taken place have led to the creation of new solidarities and new structures of power. Theodore Zeldin, in *Ambition, Love and Politics*, the first volume of his major work, *France, 1848-1945*,¹³ has avoided narrative, and has examined not only the different groups which made up French society, but has looked at intimate sentiments, aspirations and assertions. The theme is diversity, whether it be social, economic, sexual, religious, or regional. The framework remains national, since the subject is France.

In one of his many manifestos, Lucien Febvre complained that there were too many historians who were conscientious, industrious and well educated, who wrote history as their grandmothers had applied themselves to the most finicky of tapestry-work, and who only sought to find out

⁸ *The French Revolution: A Concise History*. By NORMAN HAMPSON. Thames and Hudson, £4.25.

⁹ *The Economic Modernisation of France, 1730-1880*. By ROGER PRICE. Croom Helm, £6.95.

¹⁰ *The Glassworkers of Carmaux*. By JOAN WALLACH SCOTT. Harvard University Press, £6.00, \$10.00.

¹¹ *French Legislators, 1800-1834*. By THOMAS D. BECK. University of California Press, £7.55, \$13.75.

¹² *The Rebellious Century, 1830-1930*. By CHARLES TILLY, LOUISE TILLY, RICHARD TILLY. J. M. Dent, £6.00.

¹³ Theodore Zeldin, *France, 1848-1940*, Vol. I (Oxford University Press, 1973). See Anthony Hartley, "Was France a Success?", ENCOUNTER (November 1973).

what had happened. British and American historians—sufficiently vain, according to some, to work as individuals—are certainly productive in the field of French history. But their success is

all the more striking because they are ambitious. They seek to understand and to explain, and it is to be hoped that the French read them. If so, then they will have been really successful.

Rescuing the Past

Medieval Archaeology—By DAVID M. WILSON

IN JANUARY 1971 more than 700 people attended the inaugural meeting of an institution which became known as *Rescue*. Born of the environmental lobbying of the late 'sixties, *Rescue* was to become an energetic and successful pressure group for archaeology in Britain. The familiar doom-laden prose of conservationists achieved fresh sparkle in the hands of this new organisation. It challenged effectively, if rudely, official attitudes towards archaeological excavation of threatened sites. Its officers marched in on ministers and civil servants, appeared on television, set up local pressure groups, and generally raised hell. Partly as a result of their pressure £450,000 was paid by the government in 1972–3 for rescue excavation, double the previous year's figure. In 1973–4 this figure was nearly doubled again to £800,000, while in 1974 more than a million was paid out.

At the beginning of the campaign the organisers conceived a book, and Penguin Books were persuaded to publish it. Towards the end of 1974 it came out, nearly 18 months late. It is an avowed pamphlet,¹ written white-hot by a group of enthusiasts, some professional, some amateur. The descriptions of the destruction of Britain's archaeological heritage, however, have lost their force; yesterday's campaign literature has become tedious prose. Only occasionally does the book come to life, as in the well-documented Scottish story told by Iain Crawford—only 1.8 per cent of the national excavation cake in 1967–8 went to Scotland, a figure which still shocks as the position is little better today. It is all here: destruction by motorway, by developer, by quarrying, by gas trunk-lines, by deep ploughing and by mineral extraction—and it tells a sad story. But our memory is short. It seems incredible that

there were more than 700 people at that first meeting—now *Rescue* might raise a quarter of that number.

Through the action of *Rescue* and similar bodies, however, our conscience was stirred and archaeology was reorganised in England. Ponderous Area Advisory Committees on archaeology have been set up by the Minister to advise a National Advisory Committee, to advise the Ancient Monuments Board on academic aspects of excavation policy (so much advice!). Throughout the country permanent archaeological units have been established to rescue a fraction of our disappearing history by survey and excavation. Archaeology is still short of money, destruction is still going on; but if there is a shortage of money for the digger, there is also a lack of money for development, for road-building and tunnelling. There is consequently less quarrying and, because of the recession, less mineral extraction. *Rescue* has to justify itself again; their book was out-dated even before it was published. Pamphlets are for today; the publication of results is what is now needed, and these are gradually coming—but very slowly.

ONE OF THE MOST AMBITIOUS *Rescue* projects was a survey of threatened sites in the City of London.² Among the practical recommendations of this report was the establishment of a professional archaeological unit for the City to investigate the remaining undeveloped areas of London which will largely be built over by the late 1980s. This recommendation is now partly implemented—largely as the result of this survey—and excavations on the waterfront, on Baynard's Castle, and on other city sites have produced more information than has been recovered for many years concerning post-Roman London. The *Rescue* report rightly pointed out the academic desirability of investigating the post-Roman and particularly the Anglo-Saxon city. Point has been added to this recommendation by the publication of the late Anglo-Saxon and early post-Conquest volume of a new history of London,³ which

¹ *Rescue Archaeology*. Edited by PHILIP ARTHUR RAHTZ. Penguin, 90p.

² *The Future of London's Past*. By MARTIN BIDDLE, DAPHNE M. HUDSON and C. HEIGHWAY. *Rescue* (15a Bull Plain, Hertford), £3.50.

³ *London 800–1216: The Shaping of a City*. By CHRISTOPHER BROOKE and GILLIAN KEIR. Secker & Warburg, £8.