

INTRODUCTION

IN 1948, under the arcades of the Odéon Theater, where in those days one could pick up remaindered books for a few francs (or read them on the spot, standing up for hours on end), I bought a copy of Roger Thabault's *Mon village*. The book, now much the worse for wear, is still with me. It was my first intimation (I only read André Siegfried's great dissertation later) that a profound sea-change had taken place in Thabault's little village of Mazières, in the Gâtinais, and in many other villages of the French countryside during the period that his pages covered—1848–1914—and that this change was more than political history as I knew it, though it intertwined with political history.

Thabault traced the evolution of a commune—bourg, villages, hamlets, scattered farms—a commune in which life had followed the same pattern since long before the Revolution and changed only, but then radically, in the half-century before 1914. Material conditions, mentalities, political awareness, all underwent massive alterations, a sort of precipitation process wholly different from the rather gradual evolutions or sporadic changes that accumulate to make what we describe as a period of history. Historical change rushing in headlong carried Mazières not from one historical period to another, but into a new age of mankind—an altogether different form of civilization.¹

It was all very interesting, but I was then concerned with other things. The story Thabault told colored my view of French history but did not really change it. The history I thought and taught and wrote about went on chiefly in cities; the countryside and the little towns were a mere appendage of that history, following, echoing, or simply standing by to watch what was going on, but scarcely relevant on their own account.

Twenty years later I discovered another book that described in its own way the same profound sea-change. I really do not know how I came by it, for this one was not a historian's work either. Written by a folklorist, *Civilisation traditionnelle et genres de vie* was almost contemporary to *Mon village*. On quite

a different plane, more broadly argued, it talked about the decay and the disappearance of France's traditional rites and lore. These, said its author, André Varagnac, had always altered as far back as we can see to tell. But until the nineteenth century others had always emerged in their stead. The novelty now was that the renewal process ceased: traditions died, and they were not replaced; there was no longer any spontaneous innovation in the countryside.² A whole mentality was dying—had died—out. Coincidence? Varagnac, too, situated the crucial changes in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

By now, I was ready to go further. I had begun to sense in my work in political and intellectual history—the sort that we write about and teach, the urban sort—that I was ignoring a vast dimension of reality. What happened in small towns and in the countryside? Was Varagnac right? Was there a culture or rather several cultures that carried on beside the official one we knew and studied, and that at some point gave up or were integrated with the larger whole? If so, how did this happen?

I went back to Thabault. It was not the first time I had reread him; but when one looks for different things, one *sees* different things. Thabault's hero, in a manner of speaking, the pivot of the modifications that he etches, was the village school. All French historians knew that much, to be sure. But Thabault focuses on the school in a particular context: the passage from relative isolation and a relatively closed economy to union with the outside world through roads, railroads, and a money economy. The school was important because conditions changed, because it served new conditions, and the conditions that it *helped* to change were no longer local ones but national; they were urban, they were modern.

What a discovery! After a quarter of a century spent studying French history, I was inventing for myself what any textbook could have told me. And yet perhaps that is essentially what the study of history is: the rereading of the past, so to speak, in the beginning because one wants to discover it for oneself and assimilate it, and later because what one looks for (hence sees) in familiar territory may be quite different from what one has discerned before or learned from others. So it was with me. Looking for answers to the questions that Varagnac had helped suggest drove me to discover a new France in the nineteenth-century countryside, a France where many did not speak French or know (let alone use) the metric system, where *pistoles* and *écus* were better known than francs, where roads were few and markets distant, and where a subsistence economy reflected the most common prudence. This book is about how all this changed, and about how mentalities altered in the process; in a word, about how undeveloped France was integrated into the modern world and the official culture—of Paris, of the cities.

And it is about peasants. Gordon Wright has said, no one can say it better, how dangerous it is to venture into such quicksands: "Rural France is almost infinitely diverse, and almost any generalization about the peasantry becomes

partially false as soon as it is formulated." And yet he adds, and I must echo him: "A nagging curiosity about general trends . . . led me to persist in trying to see the problem in the large."³

La Rochefoucauld remarked that one can know things well only when one knows them in detail, yet detail is infinite, hence our knowledge is fated to remain superficial and imperfect. It is a convenient argument for a book like this, in which inferences of a general nature are drawn from documentation that is necessarily partial and incomplete in the first instance. Besides, given my working hypothesis that very significant portions of rural France continued to live in a world of their own until near the end of the nineteenth century, I have deliberately focused on the areas that served my interests best—the west, center, south, and southwest—and on the 40 or 50 years before 1914. And finally, because my purpose from the start was to be not exhaustive but suggestive, the documentation reflects that approach.

The period covered, which is roughly the period encompassed by Thabault, has remained oddly unexplored—from my point of view. Among secondary sources, those from which I learned the most, and the most directly, have been the path-breaking articles of Guy Thuillier and Alain Corbin's massive unpublished dissertation on the Limousin during the middle third of the nineteenth century. The other great studies that cast light on life in the countryside deal with earlier periods (*Le Roy Ladurie*, *Pierre Goubert*, *Paul Bois*) or with the first half of the nineteenth century (*Maurice Agulhon*, *Jean Vidalenc*, *Philippe Vigier*) or with the twentieth century (*Gordon Wright*, *Henri Mendras*). From the mid-twentieth century on, indeed, there has been a wealth of sociological investigation, but most of it extends back only sketchily for introductory purposes. There are numbers of monographs, many of them distinguished and sensitive, but few of them linger long on the years I am most concerned with; and those that do (*André Siegfried*, *Georges Dupeux*) are chiefly interested in politics. As my pages make clear, my principal interest lies in ways of life and thought—a more elusive quarry. Doubly elusive when documentation is hard to find, still harder to pin down.

Special problems arise when one tries to understand the evolution of conditions and mentalities among the inarticulate masses, inarticulate, that is, on those particular levels that provide most of the records on which historians rely. Most of the subjects of historical investigation have been literate and articulate themselves; many have left clear and often deliberate records or have been described by witnesses who were well acquainted with them. The acts, thoughts, and words of the illiterate (and most of my subjects were illiterate, or as nearly so as makes no difference) remain largely unrecorded. Such records as exist are the work of outsiders who observed and recorded what they saw for purposes of their own. Police, bureaucrats, folklorists, priests, teachers, agronomists, and men of letters looked on, even probed, but whether critical or sympathetic they cannot tell us what went on as true participants. My rule

with this kind of evidence has been to try to indicate its sources and context, so that readers can take any possible prejudice (or at least orientation) into account; and to rely most freely on evidence that appears to be purely incidental to the main purpose of the witness or better still, contrary to his or her apparent interest.

Moreover, the illiterate are not in fact inarticulate; they can and do express their feelings and their minds in several ways. Sociologists, ethnologists, geographers, and most recently demographic historians have shown us new and different means of interpreting evidence, with the result that our fund of facts has turned out to be far richer than we previously believed. I have tried to learn from their work, though I have not followed the lead of any one discipline. A particularly fruitful source of evidence, especially in a work whose principal aim is to explore and suggest, is to be found in the songs, dances, proverbs, tales, and pictures of the country folk—in the whole broad realm of *arts et traditions populaires*. I have tapped this source repeatedly to discover what the rural people used, or said, or did, how these changed or came to be abandoned, and what replaced them.

But even research on traditional lines on the social history of the years 1880–1914 presents special problems. There are serious gaps in the Archives Nationales for the crucial half-century before 1914.⁴ This is matched by a corresponding poverty in the departmental archives, which are rich in material right through the Second Empire and emaciated thereafter until the years after World War I. There is considerable documentation even so, and I have mined it for a dozen prefectures. Other archives yielded much information as well: of the Ministère de la Guerre, of the Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires, of the Institut National de Recherche et de Documentation Pédagogique. So did the rich secondary materials in the Bibliothèque Nationale. To the directors and staffs of these institutions, and of the departmental archives of Allier, Ariège, Cantal, Finistère, Gers, Gironde, Haute-Vienne, Lot, Puy-de-Dôme, Pyrénées-Orientales, Vosges, and Yonne, I owe my thanks for helpfulness beyond the call of duty.

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from, his monumental and fascinating dissertation on migration in the Limousin; and M. André Varagnac shared generously both his recollections and his personal archives with me. Closer to home, Charles Tilly contributed truly constructive criticism. My thanks to all of them. Nor must I forget (I would not want to do so!) the first occasion I had to air my views on this subject, provided by the University of Southwestern Louisiana's 1971 Symposium of French-American Studies;⁵ and the two friends, Professors Amos Simpson and Vaughan Baker, whose urgings once upon an enthusiastic Louisiana night convinced me that the theme that had intrigued me for some years was worth pursuing.

I might have read much more, talked to more people, attempted a more comprehensive survey. But in the end the study would still have been incomplete, its conclusions still tentative like those of this book. Let this inquiry be taken for what it is, then: a venture in putting some flesh on the bare bones of general facts that we know already in a general way, and a suggestion of the work still to be done.

For there is good news yet to hear and fine things to be seen,
Before we go to Paradise by way of Kensal Green.



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