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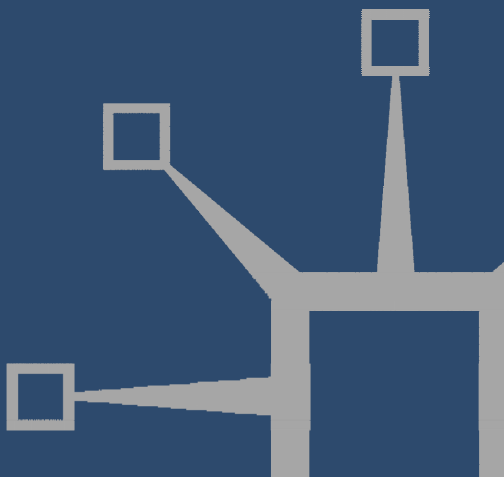
Living the French Revolution, 1789-99

Peter McPhee



Living the French Revolution, 1789–99

Also by Peter McPhee

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THE FRENCH REVOLUTION 1789–1799 (*Oxford University Press, 2002*)

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UNE COMMUNAUTÉ LANGUEDOCIENNE DANS l'HISTOIRE: Gabian 1760–1960 (*Nîmes, Lacour, 2001*)

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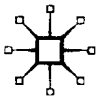

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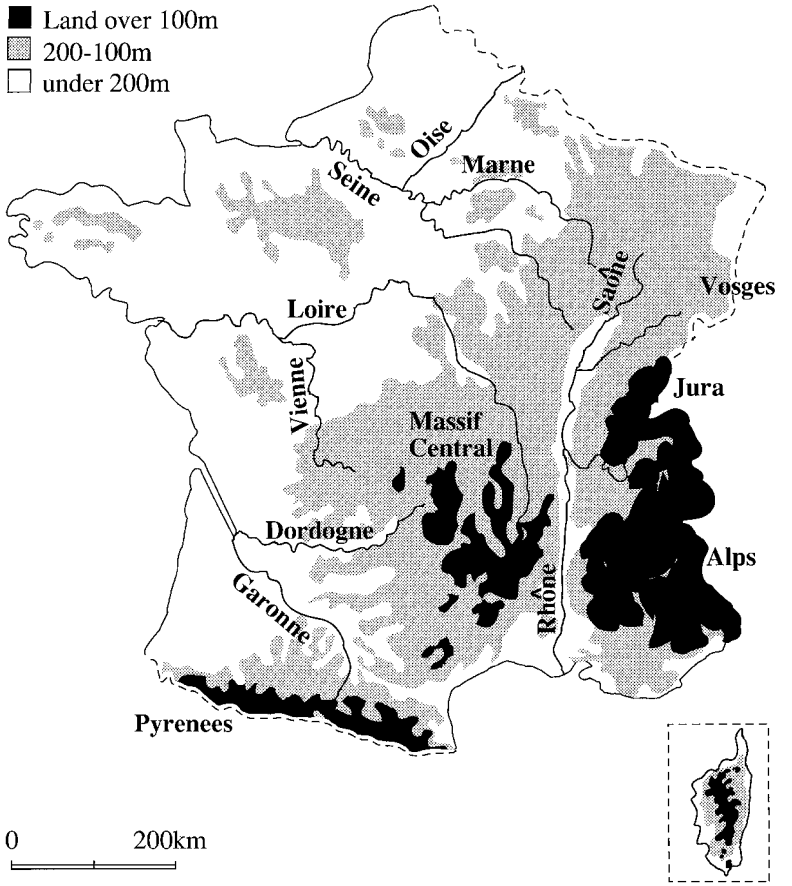
For Tom and Kit, Anton and Suzy



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11 Marie Royer, vivandière de la 51^{e} demi-Brigade. 22 ventôse an 5. Labrousse del et sculp [Paris: sn, entre 1796 et 1805] Extrait de Grasset Saint-Sauveur. Bibliothèque Nationale de France. QB1-1797.
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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviated titles have been used for some periodicals cited in notes more than once:

AHR	*American Historical Review*
AHRF	*Annales historiques de la Révolution française*
AJFS	*Australian Journal of French Studies*
Annales	*Annales: économies, sociétés, civilisations*
EHQ	*European History Quarterly*
FH	*French History*
FHS	*French Historical Studies*
JFH	*Journal of Family History*
JMH	*Journal of Modern History*
P&P	*Past & Present*
RHMC	*Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*
SH	*Social History*

Introduction

The St Jean de Bouisse family was seigneur of the tiny communities of Fraïsse and Montjoi, southwest of Narbonne. In April 1790, Montjoi complained to the revolutionary National Assembly that it had been 'enslaved by the tyranny of self-styled seigneurs without titles'; indeed, Bouisse had just made a visit to houses in the village to take the best portions of a recently butchered pig. The mayor of Fraïsse in turn described the Bouisse men: 'Four big bodies, uncles and nephews, possessors of imposing physique walking around with four-pound batons, that was the sight which followed us into our houses … M de Bouisse, following his old habits, has sworn to plague us to our deaths.' For his defence, the baron could only despair:

> I have cherished and I still cherish the people of Fraïsse as I have cherished my own children; they were so sweet and so honest in their way, but what a sudden change has taken place among them. All I hear now is *corvée, lanternes, démocrates, aristocrates*, words which for me are barbaric and which I can't use. … the former vassals believe themselves to be more powerful than Kings.[1]

There are several layers of meanings which may be teased out of this story. On the most immediate level it is, of course, an example of an outraged noble fulminating against the revolutionary madness which had engulfed his 'vassals', who in turn presented themselves as victims of longstanding oppression. The Revolution of 1789 had given them unprecedented opportunity to confront the man who had dominated their lives, even to harass him. But was their use of the language of the Revolution – 'lanternes, démocrates, aristocrates' – only a weapon of their own with which to beat the baron in turn? Or did it have a greater resonance? In which ways might a radically altered language of power have spoken of a changed actuality? What was it to 'live' the French Revolution?

These are questions for which we will never have simple, confident answers. Like the less powerful in all societies, the peasants of Montjoi and

Fraïsse had little occasion to make unsolicited statements about their world in a form which has survived for us. Their voices have mostly been preserved for us when they came into contact with institutions which controlled their lives, such as courts of law or, as in this case, when they wished to defend themselves to authorities.[2] Because of the nature of the materials with which historians work, whether printed or manuscript, they have inevitably examined the impact of the Revolution on 'the people' through the words of others. Ever since the Vendéen insurrection of 1793, for example, combatants and then historians have argued heatedly over its causes, purposes, and the scale of its killing; we know surprisingly little, nevertheless, of how those who participated voiced the reasons for which they were prepare to kill or be killed.[3]

The French Revolution was, however, one of those rare periods in history when 'ordinary' people – peasants, labourers, trades people, the indigent – felt sufficiently confident to express themselves directly to the authorities. At times this was through the medium of the records of local government – village councils or neighbourhood meetings – and at others through legal actions they initiated, or through the language of protest. This book seeks to use such evidence, and much else besides, to reflect on the experience of the Revolution for the people who lived in mainland France's country towns and villages. It investigates the ways in which the Revolution affected daily life, both in terms of the impact of legislation and of the ways in which people made and experienced changes to their own lives. In particular, it examines whether and how the lived experience of the Revolution, war and sweeping legislative change in France 1789–99 transformed cultures and society, even daily life itself.

On one level, the aim of writing such a history is a logical impossibility. This was a land of some 28 million people – and there were hundreds of thousands of slaves in its colonies – and, for each of them, the Revolution was experienced individually as well as collectively. As Alain Corbin has demonstrated, no matter what the level of the skills the historian may bring, even an entire book devoted to 'the life of an unknown' may only take us a few steps closer. His story of Louis-François Pinagot (born in 1798) reminds us, too, that biographical details of interest to the State – in tax schedules, civil registers and conscription records – are usually all we have. The mental universe of working people in the past is the most difficult for the historian to penetrate.[4]

Perhaps no historian has come closer to glimpsing that universe than Richard Cobb. Cobb relished putting names and stories to faces in urban crowds in a distinctive, *pointilliste* and often exquisite style. His passion was to recapture individual lives, with their moments of drama, their prejudices and dreams. His distaste was for ideologues – historians as much as revolutionary politicians – who claimed to speak for the masses and their supposed interests. First published in French in 1961–63, his study of the *armées révolutionnaires*,

the civilian armies of urban militants or *sans-culottes* established in the second half of 1793, is one of the seminal studies of the revolutionary period.[5] In it, Cobb documented the activities of about 40,000 *sans-culottes* in makeshift revolutionary battalions sent to the countryside to requisition supplies, to seek out deserters from the republican armies, to purge unpatriotic priests and other counter-revolutionaries and even to 'dechristianize' the provinces.

Across the next 15 years Cobb produced a series of captivating books drawing on decades spent in French archives since 1935.[6] The first of his great themes was the irrelevance of high politics to the concerns of most people. He evidently enjoyed recounting the story of Marguerite Barrois, a country girl seduced on her second night in Paris, 10 Thermidor Year II (28 July 1794), the day of Robespierre's execution, 'a date as memorable for her no doubt as for history'.[7] Most famously, Cobb wrote of the 'irrelevance' of the Revolution to the lives of masses of people who – before, during and after the Revolution – inhabited a world of unremitting poverty, uncertainty, violence and despair.[8] The targets of his thesis, that the Revolution was irrelevant to the masses of French people when it was not being made against them, were in particular his former colleagues Georges Lefebvre, Albert Soboul and George Rudé, seen to have reified the chaotic world of a revolution into peasant and *sans-culottes* 'movements'.[9]

Cobb's second theme was the increasing divide between town and country: 'The events of the Revolution constantly accentuated the economic, religious and political gulf between town and country, especially after the outbreak of war.'[10] Since Cobb was primarily interested in Paris and other cities rather than in the countryside, which he saw as locked in a bitter struggle to keep safe its foodstuffs and saints from the dechristianizing *sans-culottes*, he was sure that the Revolution was 'increasingly a townsman's affair … it is not surprising that many countrymen turned against a revolution from the benefits of which they were apparently to be excluded'.[11] In so far as Cobb wrote about the countryside at all, it was as the source of migrants to Paris or as the terrain for *sans-culottes'* missionary zeal. The politics of its inhabitants were those of survival, against dearth, conscription and religious reform.

Perhaps because my own family background is that of country towns and farming, I have always been more intrigued by how rural people lived and worked. Although I work in an élite institution and inhabit a large city, the most interesting questions about history for me have long been to do with how rural people make their own histories. This is not a history of the people of great cities or substantial towns,[12] or of social élites, about whom so much more is known because of their literacy. Of course, any study of rural communities cannot ignore large towns and cities but, rather than following the urban–rural paradigm of laws, news, influence and change being diffused from the capital, of regions as 'provincial', this book seeks to place the inhabitants of rural France at centre stage, to examine how they lived

through a Revolution they variously accepted and supported or resented and opposed.

The meaning of the Revolution for the inhabitants of rural France has long been the subject of debate. Georges Lefevbre long ago convinced historians that peasants were not passive participants in the French Revolution, arguing that there was a distinct peasant revolution within the Revolution as a whole, with its own pulse and projects.[13] More recently, other historians – such as Anatolï Ado, Peter Jones and John Markoff – have reasserted the importance of initiatives taken by rural communities across much of the country in pressuring successive assemblies to finally abolish seigneurialism in 1792–93.[14] By seeking to place rural people at the forefront of their stories, they have offered a reading of the Revolution as in part an ongoing dialogue between the capital and the countryside.

But, while the importance of popular participation is evident, was this sporadic and in some sense peripheral to everyday concerns? Was the French Revolution 'a magnificent irrelevance' to the poorer groups in French society, as Cobb claimed? Donald Sutherland agreed: it was 'largely an urban phenomenon', which drew on a narrow base of support in the countryside and left a legacy of 'perhaps even greater misery for the poor'. 'One great and unpleasant reality about the Revolution', he concluded, is that 'the revolutionaries drove very large numbers of women and men to a profound revulsion against them and all their works when they stripped away the markers that gave their lives meaning'.[15] Like Sutherland, Eugen Weber has pointed to the low participation rates in elections as evidence that the Revolution was irrelevant to most people, or even anathema. 'If a poll of French countryfolk could have been taken in 1799', asserts T.J.A. Le Goff, 'a clear majority would have qualified the Revolution as a disaster'.[16] David Andress, too, has concluded a recent overview of French society and the Revolution by asserting that it was a revolution made 'against the people'.[17]

These and other historians have asserted that the French Revolution may have begun with a peasant upheaval but that rural people quickly became disillusioned by the Revolution's religious policies, lack of reforms to tenancy arrangements, and incessant demands for taxes and conscripts. Indeed, Sutherland has argued that, if there was a popular movement in the revolutionary period, it was the royalist and Catholic provincial counter-revolution. While he has argued his case persuasively, this book will investigate the ways in which, even in communities hostile to the Revolution, the patterned rituals of daily life were transformed by the very experience of resisting revolutionary upheaval.

This is not another history of the French Revolution, nor a history of popular participation in the Revolution in the French countryside, which has been undertaken many times in every region of France and at a more general level in recent years by Sutherland, Anatolï Ado, David Andress, Peter Jones, John Markoff, Michel Vovelle and many others.[18] Writing on the rural dimension of

the French Revolution has assumed that the lived experience of rural people may be equated with their popular participation in the Revolution, whether for it or against it. For almost a century – notably since the work of Georges Lefebvre on the peasants of the Nord – historians have studied the popular Revolution by analysing the behaviour of revolutionary crowds in town and country, the emergence of a *sans-culottes* 'movement', or the impact of the Revolution on society and the economy. Such an approach inevitably privileges those rare moments when working people actively participated in the Revolution. For example, David Andress has recently produced an informative synthesis of what we know about popular participation which essentially highlights moments of violent intervention in the course of the Revolution.[19]

Histories of the French Revolution have followed a familiar chronological structure in line with major political turning points. In a general way social history has questioned this conventional 'periodization' of history as privileging the world of élite politics, arguing instead that the rhythms of daily life, economic and social change move far more slowly and cut across such divisions. Do 'public and private calendars' – the linear progression of political life and the rhythms of the private and familial world – ever move to the same impulses? In the case of the French Revolution, however, not to follow a narrative structure would be to weaken the power of an unfolding drama. The French Revolution was a political and social upheaval which involved and affected all French people, though in sharply contrasting ways.[20]

This book is premised on the approach that the local experience of the Revolution is best understood as a process of negotiation and confrontation with distant governments rather than simply one of more-or-less recalcitrant provincial communities being acted upon, and only occasionally lashing out in violent retribution. The book seeks to capture something of what it meant to live through a great revolution for the mass of the population, the nine-tenths of the population who lived on the farms and in the villages and small towns of rural France. Of particular importance will be the evocation of the ways in which revolutionary changes altered the textures of daily life or were adapted as people sought to resist such change. How did rural and small-town men and women adopt, adapt and resist change from Paris? In what ways was life different by the end of that decade, and what had been the major experiences of the Revolution along the way?

Never had there been more people living in the French countryside than there were in 1789. Largely because of a protracted series of fair to good harvests in the years after 1750, by 1780 the population of France had increased by 3.5 million from perhaps 24.5 million. Using the later French measure of the 'urban threshold' being 2,000 people, perhaps two persons in ten lived in an urban centre. But most towns of up to 10,000 people (for example, Nevers, Bourg or Laon) essentially served the surrounding agrarian economy: half the 'urban' population lived in country towns like these which were essentially

rural in orientation. The rest inhabited 38,000 rural communities or parishes with on average about 730 residents.[21] Ten times as many people inhabited France's villages and farms as do today: the countryside was crowded with people and livestock in a way that has today been forgotten.

These people were and are commonly referred to as 'paysans'. But this simple term disguises the complexities of rural society which were to be revealed in the varied behaviour of rural people during the Revolution. In most regions, the bulk of the agricultural population was either smallholders, tenant-farmers or sharecroppers, many of whom were also reliant on practising a craft or on wage-work. The peasantry made up about four-fifths of the 'Third Estate' or 'commoners' but across the country it owned only about 40 per cent of the land outright. This varied from about 17 per cent in the Mauges region of western France to 64 per cent in the Auvergne. Farm labourers were as much as half the population in areas of large-scale agriculture such as the Ile-de-France around Paris and in Picardy. In all rural communities there was a minority of larger farmers, often dubbed the *coqs du village*, who were large tenant-farmers (*fermiers*) or independent landowners (*laboureurs*). Depending on the region, there were those who specialized in winegrowing, charcoal burning, weaving, timber-cutting, fishing and livestock. Larger villages also had a minority of people – priests, lawyers, artisans, textile-workers and so on – who were not peasants at all, but who commonly owned some land, such as the vegetable garden belonging to the priest.

The peasant population lived in a diverse and contrasting habitat, varying from the large, clustered villages and *bourgs* of a thousand people and more in parts of the south and east to the dispersed farms and hamlets of the southern Massif Central, Limousin and western *bocage*. Everywhere, their relationship with local small towns was close and constant; indeed, central to any consideration of the revolutionary experience of the working people of town and country is the relationship between them. Georges Lefebvre, while highlighting the specificities of the peasant Revolution, saw it as having in common with towns a mistrust of capitalist commerce and production. Was Alfred Cobban correct to stress instead the town–country divide as a key element in the driving force of the Revolution? Or, rather, should one follow Richard Cobb in stressing the diversity and interplay of urban centres and their rural hinterlands?[22]

* * *

Historians have tried many ways to capture the meaning of the Revolution for the mass of French people. Most commonly this has been through the use of case studies, ranging from studies of an entire region or, following the revolutionary reorganization of administration, a department, to closer analyses of a micro-region or a single community. More imaginatively, Peter Jones has written a comparative study of six very different communities.[23] Whatever

the contribution these case studies have made to the overall richness of the historiography, the combined effect has been to highlight diversity. This difficulty has been compounded by the extreme difficulty of capturing the experience and perceptions of the masses of working people, most of whom were not literate in the written word. Despite the attempts by revolutionary governments to create the bases for national unity, culminating in the *République une et indivisible* after 1792, the village and its immediate *pays* remained the fundamental spatial reference point for the great mass of new citizens. The Revolution created the departmental structures of administration which have largely endured to the present, but only rarely did these coincide with people's self-identities or with a cohesive geographic and economic character.

Despite these limitations, some distance may be made in constructing a history of the lived experience of the Revolution. For we know an enormous amount about that extraordinary decade – indeed, there have been few periods in history which have been so extensively or so well studied – even if surprisingly little has been written with a view to capturing what it might have been like to live through such a revolutionary upheaval.

The richness of French archives – for which the Revolution is in large measure responsible – has made it possible for a history of the Revolution to be written about any community. Not only is there a danger in reading these sources as unproblematic records of a past reality, however; there is another danger in assuming that they represent what it was like to live through this Revolution. Put simply, the archives do not record silences. It is one thing to order extant records into a village or regional history, but what does it mean when nothing is deemed worthy of record? Should this be read as signifying that support for the Revolution was so solid as to be uncontested and therefore without trace in the records? Or that the Revolution was simply irrelevant?

Most of France's 38,000 or more villages have had a history written. With a few splendid exceptions, these have been the work of an *érudit local*, an industrious local who has returned to the extant sources of a loved village's past. These have catalogued the information recorded in local council or departmental records: very few have pondered the meaning of the Revolution for the village's inhabitants. The Bicentenary of the Revolution in 1989 was the occasion of a veritable flood of several thousands of these local histories, continuing a long tradition of local, commemorative scholarship. These monographs vary sharply in quality: from antiquarian collections of undigested detail (often, however, including valuable transcriptions of manuscript documents) to the genuinely analytical. Almost always, however, they suffer from a lack of any evocation of a dynamic between the local community and national governments. At the other extreme are outstanding local and regional monographs, such as those of the northernmost region of France by Jean-Pierre Jessenne and Liana Vardi.[24]

These difficulties serve to remind us of another dimension of the special nature of the historical dialogue into which this project enters. Those at the centre of this project are prevented from speaking directly to the historian

not only because the great majority of them were illiterate; this is also a study of rural people through the filter of a French language few understood readily and fewer still spoke. As the Amis de la Constitution of Carcassonne, in the Occitan-speaking south, put it early in the Revolution, 'In the town and surrounding villages, the people understand French; but the majority speaks *patois*. In more distant places, only *patois* is spoken, and French is less understood.' Their Catalan neighbours to the south had been incorporated in the French State for only 130 years; there, too, linguistic particularity was obvious. The Abbé Chambon responded to a national enquiry in 1790 that 'Country people do not know how to speak French … To destroy [the Catalan language] it would be necessary to destroy the sun, the cool of the evenings, the type of food, the quality of water, in the end the whole person.'[25] The enquiry estimated that only three of the 28 million people used French as their sole language: for most it was a second language used with great difficulty and for several million it was not used at all. Did this lack of facility in French accentuate the likelihood of misunderstanding and mistrust? Did it prevent provincial people from entering into their own dialogue with successive, distant French governments?

Previous attempts to reconstruct the lived experience of the French Revolution have been restricted either by their perspective or by the deliberately selective thematic approach of their authors. There have been attempts to write the history of 'daily life' during the Revolution. The first, by the director of the Musée Carnavalet, Jean Robiquet, was essentially restricted to Paris and is further limited by the paucity of published social history at the time it was written in the late 1930s.[26] Fifty years later, Jean-Paul Bertaud, a distinguished historian of the 'people in arms', published a history of daily life packed with information and insights, but with disproportionate emphasis on Paris, the culture of the literate and the army. Michel Vovelle has probed brilliantly the 'revolutionary mentality', but also largely concentrated on changes in urban popular political culture.[27] An ambitious attempt by Serge Bianchi to study the 'cultural Revolution' of the most radical period of the Revolution is restricted by its focus on – indeed, celebration of – examples of revolutionary change in daily life rather than resistance to them. Other historians have focused instead on the construction of a new civic order in Paris and its transmission to or rejection by the provinces. An outstanding overview by Isser Woloch is deliberately 'the view from the center', although replete with local examples reported to Paris; in contrast, Alan Forrest has successfully synthesized the outlines of the Revolution from a genuinely national perspective.[28]

More recent attempts to study the impact of the Revolution on daily life have resulted in illuminating specific aspects of the revolutionary experience. Surveys by Alan Forrest and Jean-Paul Bertaud of the relationship between civil society and the military have paid due attention to the ways in which conscription and requisitioning were experienced and resisted.[29] The

impact of the Revolution on collective political practice has been carefully studied by Malcolm Crook, and Mona Ozouf has analysed official and, to some extent, popular festivals.[30] In contrast, historians have had little to say about the environment during the revolutionary period, and even less about whether and how contemporaries debated its protection.

This book extends these analyses into a wider, synthetic interpretation of the ways in which the challenges, opportunities and threats of the revolutionary decade were experienced by the working people of town and country. Most important, rather than proceeding on the assumption that change initiated by revolutionary governments in Paris transformed daily life, it will investigate the ways in which such changes need to be understood also as the result of a decade-long process of negotiation and confrontation between men and women in the provinces and distant governments in Paris.

Local archives, petitions, parliamentary debates and official reports have formed an important body of research materials for exploring these issues. The major pieces of legislation pertaining to daily life and of the parliamentary and Committee debates preceding them were studied through the *Réimpression de l'ancien Moniteur*. Valuable also in this regard was the rich documentation from the records of key committees of successive governments, in particular the Comité des Droits Féodaux and the Comité des Rapports. Of particular use were three major holdings in the Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne: *The Maclure Collection of French Revolutionary Materials*; the Pergamon Press *French Revolution Research Collection*; and a remarkable collection of pamphlets from the Revolution. There are, of course, limitations to the use of all such materials. First, the parliamentary debates and official reports have to be read within a framework of political structures and as articulations of particular attitudes with specific audiences in mind. Second, comparatively little of this material articulated the attitudes of the mass of working people – and was very rarely in their own words – and it has to be read as prescriptive as well as descriptive. Often, it is in examining the ideology of political and administrative élites that the attitudes may be discerned of those they condemned. One exception to this paucity of direct evidence from one side of the debate is that the committees of successive assemblies received both solicited and unsolicited letters and petitions from rural people on specific issues, for example, proposals to authorize or even encourage the sale or distribution of common lands. It has been essential to draw on local records such as family courts and the deliberations of village and small-town municipal councils. The latter are a rich source of relatively untrammelled expressions of popular attitudes, especially in 1789–93, for the men elected to these bodies. Case studies were undertaken of the regions in and around Alençon (department of the Orne), Bourg-en-Bresse (Ain), Carcassonne (Aude), Laon (Aisne) and La Rochelle (Charente-Maritime). These were complemented by earlier, more specific studies of, for example, Collioure and St-Laurent-de-Cerdans (Pyrénées-Orientales) and Gabian (Hérault).

This book has been greatly facilitated by grants from the Australian Research Council. The project was made the richer by direct contributions from research assistants, graduate students and colleagues: above all, Juliet Flesch and Emily McCaffrey, and on particular topics Greg Burgess, Suzy Emison, Elizabeth Graham, Julie Kalman, Anthony King, Jonathon Marshall, Kate Mustafa, Carine Renoux, Megan Utter and Jeremy Whiteman. It would not have been possible without the willing assistance of librarians and archivists in Alençon, Bourg-en-Bresse, Laon, La Rochelle, Montpellier, Paris, and, over many years, Carcassonne and Perpignan. Finally, Charlotte Allen has been a constant source of comment and encouragement.

1
Describing the Old Regime

Thirty kilometres from Reims in northeastern France is the imposing Benedictine abbey of Vauclair, founded in the twelfth century. On 8 March 1789 some of the inhabitants of one of its dependent villages, La Vallée-Foulon, met together to respond to a royal decree of 24 January requesting parishes to produce their lists of grievances (*cahiers de doléances*) for the consideration of the looming Estates-General in May. Those present expressed their boundless gratitude to the abbey for the land and houses it made available for rent: 'they declare that they have no complaint to make'. Perhaps, they suggested, the King might consider reducing taxes; whatever the case, they put 'their full confidence in the paternal goodness of His Majesty'.[1] The reasons for the quiescence of La Vallée-Foulon were perhaps that the *cahier* was drawn up by the better-off inhabitants (it was signed by only 10 men from the 32 households in the village) and that it was composed in the intimidating presence of Charles-Louis Dequin, the abbey's own legal officer. Certainly, however, it was a highly unusual document in expressing the community's apparently passive acceptance of its lot.

In the spring of 1789, people in villages and towns all over France met like those in La Vallée-Foulon to formulate proposals for the regeneration of public life and to elect deputies to the Estates-General. Parish and guild assemblies, and meetings of clergy and nobles, were engaged in compiling their 'lists of grievances' to guide their deputies in the advice they would offer the King. The drawing up of these *cahiers* in the context of political uncertainty, fiscal emergency and subsistence crisis was for most people the first episode in a decade of revolution. They would know that only in retrospect, of course, just as it is only from hindsight that it strikes historians as the decisive moment in the mass politicization of social friction.

Country folk and townspeople had for centuries been accustomed to parish assemblies – both formal and informal – which governed local affairs. In June 1787 the Controller-General Calonne had issued an edict which imposed uniformity across much of the country on the diverse forms in which parishes had formerly met to decide matters of local concerns. From now on

those paying more than ten *livres* in direct taxes, in most areas a majority of adult men, were to form a parish Assembly to elect a municipal council composed of six 'conseillers' and two or three 'consuls' which would include as *ex officio* members the priest and the seigneur, the latter of whom had the right to chair meetings.[2] But the electoral provisions for the Estates-General announced on 24 January were far broader: all adult male taxpayers in the countryside were eligible to attend special parish meetings which were to agree on the terms of the *cahiers* and to appoint delegates, usually two or four depending on the size of the parish, to represent the parish at the district (*bailliage* or *sénéchaussée*) level.

The parish and craft meetings convened to draw up these *cahiers* were an outcome of a long-term political and financial crisis. France's involvement in the war of independence waged by Britain's North American colonies in 1775–83 had partially revenged the humiliations that Britain had inflicted on France in India, Canada and the Caribbean; however, the war cost France over 1 billion *livres*, more than twice the usual annual revenue of the state. As the royal state sank into financial crisis after 1783, the costs of servicing this massive debt impelled the monarchy to seek ways of ending noble taxation immunity and the capacity of noble-dominated high courts (Parlements) to resist royal decrees to that end.

In 1787–88 royal ministers made successive attempts to persuade meetings of the most prominent aristocrats to agree to lift the fiscal privileges of the nobility or Second Estate. In February 1787, Calonne sought to convince an Assembly of 144 'Notables', only 10 of whom were non-noble, by offering concessions such as the establishment of regional assemblies in all provinces in return for the introduction of a universal land tax, the reduction of other taxes such as the *taille* and *gabelle* and the abolition of internal customs barriers. His proposals were rebuffed, in particular that of the land tax: he was dismissed in April. Further attempts at reform foundered on the nobility's insistence that only a gathering of representatives of the three orders as an Estates-General could agree to such innovation. Tension between crown and nobility came to a head in August 1788, with the Parlements insisting that the measures that the King's ministry sought to impose amounted to 'royal despotism'.

In such a situation, both sides looked to an Estates-General to provide legitimacy for their claims. They were both mistaken. Instead, the calling of the Estates-General in May 1789 facilitated the expression of tensions at every level of French society. The remarkable vibrancy of debate in the months before May was facilitated by the suspension of press censorship and the publication of several thousand political pamphlets. This war of words was further fuelled by Louis' indecision about the procedures to be followed at Versailles. Would representatives of the three orders meet separately, as at the previous meeting of the Estates-General in 1614 or in a single chamber? Louis' decision in December to double the size of Third Estate representation

without resolving this matter served only to highlight further this crucial issue of political power.

The calling of the Estates-General and the convocation of assemblies to frame the *cahiers* was a shock which reverberated at every level of society. Millions of rural and urban households which had hitherto experienced the structures of power and privilege as controls to be obeyed, sidestepped or occasionally contested were now authorized, even enjoined, to reflect on their efficacy and legitimacy. This was unprecedented in the lives of working people.

The *cahiers* of the Third Estate ranged in length from many pages of detailed criticisms and suggestions to the three sentences written in a mixture of French and Catalan from the tiny village of Serrabone in the stony foothills of the Pyrenees. Despite this diversity, there is no better source for understanding popular attitudes in early 1789. They also offer the historian the opportunity to sketch the outlines of the way communities described the world in which they lived, and how they felt it could be made more just.

There are three important limits to the veracity and transparency of the *cahiers* as direct statements of the views of the commoners of the countryside. A first limitation to their usefulness is that many of the *cahiers* of rural parishes in particular were influenced by a model document, usually emanating from a nearby town.[3] For example, many of the *cahiers* of parishes between Narbonne and Carcassonne in Languedoc were influenced by a *cahier* probably emanating from the former. Even so, however, the parish assemblies almost always added some articles of their own. At Moux, for example, the *cahier* reproduced 26 articles from the model, only to break abruptly into a less grammatically correct but more forceful tone for eight of its own. Parish assemblies commonly deleted articles from the model *cahier* as well as adding to it.[4] Further around the Mediterranean, half of the 346 *cahiers* in the *sénéchausée* of Nîmes used clauses in circulated *cahiers*, but none was a simple copy.[5] In the *bailliage* of Amont in eastern France, scores of parishes reproduced a statement demanding that 'all forges, furnaces and factories established in the province of Franche-Comté within the past thirty years be destroyed as well as older ones whose proprietors do not personally possess a forest large enough to power them for six months per year'.[6] Rather than reflecting unthinking peasant acquiescence in a model *cahier*, however, the common reiteration of clauses underscores the particular resonance of the issue.

A second constraint is that, at times, the *cahiers* were compiled under direct pressure or indirect forms of intimidation from *curés* and seigneurs or their agents, as in La Vallée-Foulon. In rural communities, the economically dependent were acutely aware of the potential costs of outspoken opposition to noble privilege. Even where the influence of *curés* and seigneurial agents was benign, it may have prevented the *cahiers* from being transparent representations of peasant attitudes, for example, when the *curé* or local bourgeois

acted as an intermediary.[7] In the impoverished little village of Erceville, north of Orléans, for example, the Third Estate meeting was presided over by the local judge employed by the seigneur, a prominent member of the Parlement of Paris whose holdings covered most of the parish. Not surprisingly, his tenants stayed away from the meeting. Nevertheless, in this case the peasants, labourers and artisans who drew up Erceville's *cahier* were remarkably blunt, urging that 'without any distinction of title or rank, the said seigneur be taxed like them', that 'the tithe and *champart* be abolished, or at least converted into an annual payment in money', and – clearly aware of the looming issue of the locus of political power – that all taxes should require 'the consent of the whole Nation assembled in Estates-General'.

A final constraint on the transparency of the *cahiers* is that, although in theory all male taxpayers over twenty-five years of age were eligible to participate in the process of drawing up *cahiers*, their compilation was likely to be – whether or not by general consent – in the hands of the better-off minority of villagers. This does not mean that others were neither present nor involved. The 12 (of 129) extant Third Estate *cahiers* from the Corbières region of Languedoc concluded with the formula that 'the literate members have signed', but the numbers of those who did (some 165 men from the 613 households in the 12 parishes, or just 27 per cent) tell us more about literacy rates than numbers at the assemblies. For many more men, in fact, participated than indicated by the numbers of those who could sign the final document, the proportion of households which were actually represented at these parish meetings ranged from 28 per cent at Bizanet to 85 per cent at Cruscades. Similarly, we do not know whether the 10 signatures at the foot of the *cahier* from La Vallée-Foulon, with which this chapter began, were those of all present, or whether others were present who were unable to sign.[8]

Historians have commonly doubted the veracity of the *cahiers* because of these limitations or have used them as a way of indicating the fissures running through French society. They can be used in a third way: as a window into the Ancien Régime. While ostensibly a list of the grievances of all groups in French society, they can also be used to tell us much of how commoners in town and country understood the world around them and how they expressed their own identity within that world.

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Every parish and urban corporation expressed grievances which tell us something of the specifics of a local community; what is most remarkable is the similarity of grievances across the country. The *cahiers* reveal that the fundamental issue across most of France was that of control of resources and the claims of the privileged over those resources. The interaction between rural people and their environments was mediated through a complex mix of social relationships which had evolved across eight centuries. All land

worked by peasants – whether or not they owned it – was subject to the claims of others: the King, the Catholic Church, seigneurs and others in the community. Few peasants owned enough land for their household's survival, and even when they did their labours had also to meet royal taxes, the Church tithe, and a maze of seigneurial and other exactions. Nor could they ignore the usage rights of others in their community. That is why any attempt to describe the experience of French people during the revolutionary decade after 1789 has to begin with an understanding of the fundamental concerns of most people: how the household could meet its own needs and the demands to which it was subject.

The world described by rural communities in 1789 was one in which control over landed property and the people who worked it was at its core. Rural people were not only vulnerable to the climate, but also underwrote the culture, lifestyles and expenditure of the three pillars of power and privilege: the nobility, the Church and the monarchical State. All three extracted 'surplus' (though the peasantry would never have described it as such), ranging from as little as 14 per cent of what a peasant household might produce in Brittany (8 per cent as tithe, 4 per cent as taxes and 2 per cent as seigneurial dues) to as much as 40 per cent elsewhere.[9] But dues were a central concern in the *cahiers* everywhere, even in Brittany. The main harvest due – variously known as the *champart, tasque, censive* or *tierce* – varied from one-twentieth in the Dauphiné to one-third in the Limousin: an average figure for the whole country would be one-sixth, but rates varied even on lands within the same parish.

The silence of most noble *cahiers* on the issue of seigneurial dues speaks volumes about their importance. Robert Forster has emphasized the role of some nobles in the introduction of market-oriented agricultural practices on their own land,[10] but noble wealth more commonly relied upon restrictive contracts on rented land and regular payment of dues in cash or kind. The importance to nobles of seigneurial dues varied sharply – in the south, from 71 per cent of noble income in the Rouergue to 34 per cent in upper Auvergne and just 8 per cent in the Lauragais – but was significant everywhere. Harvest dues were bolstered by other significant 'rights', such as a monopoly (*banalité*) over the village oven, grape and olivepress, and mill; irregular payments on land transfers and even marriages; obligatory unpaid labour by the community on the lord's lands; and important 'honorific' prerogatives recognizing pre-eminence in the parish.[11]

John Markoff and Gilbert Shapiro have analysed 1,112 of the 40,000 or more *cahiers*, 748 of them from village communities.[12] Their monumental analysis has offered the clearest understanding thus far of the range and incidence of rural grievances. The most common parish complaints concerned taxation exemptions, the structure and powers of the Estates-General and indirect taxes. It is clear from the *cahiers* that although feudalism in its 'pure' form, if it ever existed fully, no longer controlled the countryside, the economic power and seigneurial 'rights' fiercely guarded by the nobility and

religious orders were a constant dimension of rural life. Their analysis demonstrates that peasants were far more concerned in 1789 with material rather than symbolic burdens, that they largely ignored all those trappings of seigneurial status which weighed little in terms of controls on produce, such as the public display of arms and reserved pews in Churches.

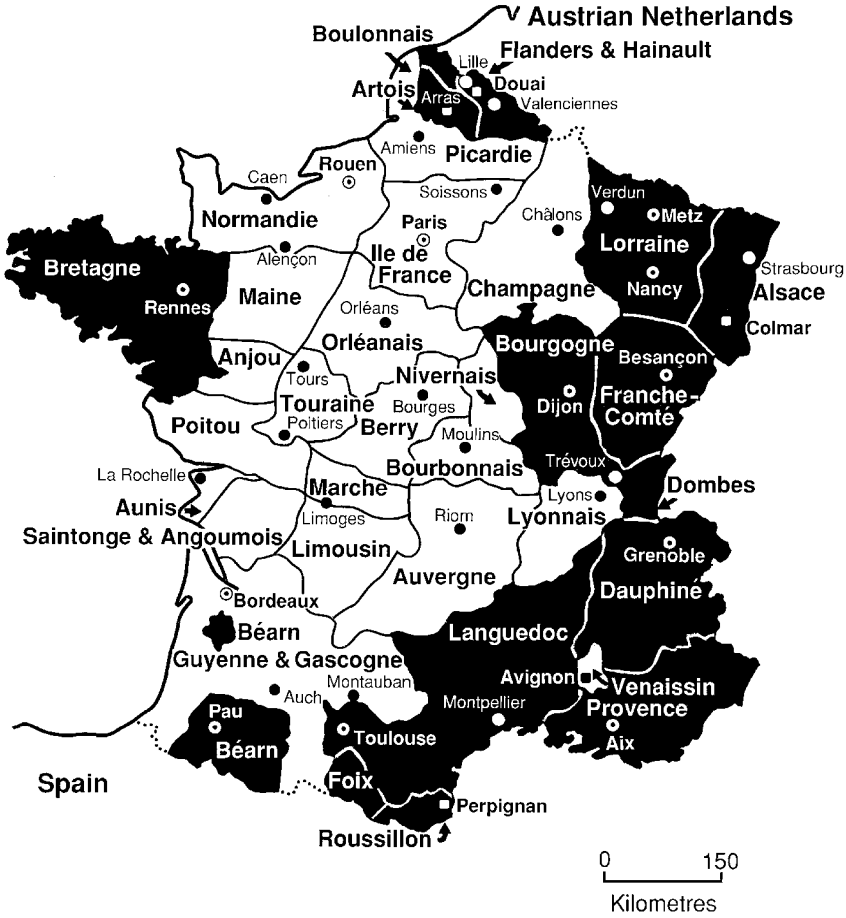
In the districts of Troyes, Auxerre and Sens, an analysis of 389 parish *cahiers* by Peter Jones has shown that seigneurial dues and *banalités* were explicitly criticized in 40 per cent, 36 per cent and 27 per cent, respectively, leaving aside other common complaints about hunting rights and seigneurial courts. Inevitably, the composite *cahiers* drawn up by urban bourgeois at the district (*bailliage*) level excised many rural grievances deemed too parochial; nevertheless, 64 per cent of the 666 *cahiers* at this level across France called for the abolition of seigneurial dues. In stark contrast, 84 per cent of noble *cahiers* were simply silent on the whole matter.[13]

Despite the intimidation which seigneurs and their agents were able to exert, the boldness of vulnerable rural people was a times startling. In the midst of a series of very specific complaints in the *cahier* of Silly-en-Multien, a village of 580 people near Senlis, 50 km northeast of Paris, was inserted an article from which two nervous village notables promptly disassociated themselves: 'What advantage for the public good if the hunting codes and feudal dues were abolished, that there were no *banalités*, in a word that the French regained their liberty.'[14] From the village of Pont-sur-Seine in Champagne a seigneur's agent wrote to his master:

> In vain I've done everything I can to exclude from the *cahier* the articles on the abolition of *banalités*, of the right to hunt, and other seigneurial dues … The intention and the tenacity of the people are immovable on this question and it is impossible to dissuade them, because they have been given the right to express their grievances.[15]

Peasants took the opportunity to highlight what seemed to be humiliating 'rights', for example, that requiring the inhabitants of Moimay, near Vesoul in the east, to beat the seigneur's ponds at night when frogs' croaks were too loud.[16] In the southernmost corner of the kingdom, the few lines submitted from the hamlet of Périllos were startlingly hostile to the seigneurial system: 'This community is very poor because we don't have the same rights and privileges as do others; the Seigneur treats us like slaves.'[17]

Although more than three-quarters of the village *cahiers* criticized seigneurialism (especially dues, monopolies and periodical levies), the more common target of peasant anger in 1789 was State taxation.[18] The issues were closely linked, however, for what rankled most with commoners was the privileged fiscal treatment of the noble élite, whether seigneurs or as bishops and abbots within the Church. Typical in this regard was the *cahier* of the parish of Sagy in the Vexin region to the north of Paris, situated between



Map 2 Provinces in the 1780s

bends in the Seine and Oise rivers. Its targets were the burden of State taxes on commoners, and noble hunting and other privileges: they wanted 'to pay taxes in proportion to their capacity, with the clergy and nobility, and to enjoy in freedom the cultivation of their land without being troubled by any form of servitude'.[19] Similarly, the *cahier* of the *bailliage* of Salers, north of Aurillac, was drawn up by professional men and substantial farmers who targeted the tax system of the monarchy and, as if in anticipation of the events of the summer, described one noble prerogative as 'a monument remaining from the *Ancien Régime féodal*'.[20]

Two rural parish *cahiers* from the province of Berry, in central France, share some essential characteristics with others across the country. Levet, 18 km south of Bourges, was a village of about 500 people in 77 households in 1789. Four *laboureurs* (farmers) and thirty *manoeuvres* (rural labourers) gathered on 1 March to draw up this *cahier*; only four of them were able to sign it. Levet was remarkable for the number of privileged persons – 17 ecclesiastics or orders and 9 lay persons – who extracted revenue from its territory. Among the former were the parish priest and several religious orders from Bourges: the Benedictines, Ursulines, Carmes and Visitandines. Marcilly, a similar distance to the east of Bourges, was smaller than Levet, with fewer than 300 people in its 43 households. Among the 40 men at the Assembly on 1 March were 3 *fermiers* (tenant-farmers), 3 *laboureurs*, 13 *manoeuvres*, a blacksmith and a longsawyer; only 8 of them could sign their names. Three nobles and a priest had seigneurial rights or privileged land in Marcilly. The two *cahiers* were in accord on the critical issue of political power and dealt with it straight away: they insisted 'that the Third Estate vote by head at the Assembly of the Estates-General' (Levet). Similarly, they agreed 'that all financial privileges be abolished; consequently, that the three orders no longer be exempt from any of the public responsibilities and taxes that the most unfortunate class of the Third Estate alone endures and pays' (Marcilly). The same *cahier* recommended 'that there be only one custom, one law, and one system of weights and measures'.[21] On religious matters the critical tone of the *cahiers* was not so typical, Levet insisting that no priest should leave his parish for more than a day without appointing a replacement, and Marcilly that the salary of some priests be reduced and 'that the Chartreuse communities be abolished, the monks secularised and each given eight hundred *livres*; the surplus of their income to belong to his Majesty'. The dominance of the gathering by the better-off peasantry in each village was attested to by the concerns voiced in Levet 'that a regulation will be created for farm workers requiring them to continue their service instead of abandoning it at the moment they are most needed' (a reference to strikes by labourers at harvest time) and in Marcilly that beggars be more tightly policed.[22]

Some parishes used *cahiers* to focus strategically on a particular issue. This was the case in the Occitan-speaking village of Gabian, 20 km north of Béziers. Among the dues payable to the bishop of Béziers, its seigneur since 988, were

100 *setiers* (a *setier* was about 85 l) of barley, 28 *setiers* of wheat, 880 bottles of olive oil, 18 chickens, 4 pounds of beeswax, 4 partridges and a rabbit. Reflecting Gabian's ancient role as a marketing centre between mountains and coast, it also had to pay 1 pound of pepper, 2 ounces of nutmeg and 2 ounces of cloves.[23] Despite the weight of these dues – and those paid to two other seigneurs – the meeting to draw up the *cahier* was instead used as the occasion for bitter complaint that a royal court had been relocated a decade earlier, leading to the departure of those it employed and a claimed breakdown of social order. As the last village of the plain before the wooded hills towards Bédarieux, it was claimed that the village was particularly prey to 'brigands' from the hills and from the village itself, so much so that travellers were forced to cross its land in groups for their own safety and the villagers themselves lived in a state of terror. Like many of the *cahiers*, that of Gabian revealed a potent sense of its own history, contrasting its situation with a flourishing past in the 1440s; since the ravages of the wars of religion had ended in 1709, its population had fallen by two-thirds. Like many other *cahiers*, too, the village had exaggerated for effect: the population had in fact increased from about 600 in 1706 to about 770 in 1780.

The role of seigneurs in administering justice was a particular concern in the province of Berry, where the parish of Levet (like many others) simply asked that 'seigneurial justice be abolished and those called to justice instead plead before the closest royal judge'. Rural folk were under no illusions that the primary purpose of the seigneurial courts was to maintain the property and privileges of the nobility and Church. Anthony Crubaugh has shown that, at least in Aunis and Saintonge, and probably elsewhere, the system of seigneurial justice was far from moribund or atrophied, as many historians have assumed it to be. The royal *sénéchaussée* of St Jean d'Angély had no fewer than 171 seigneurial courts for its 146 parishes. They were a real presence in the life of the rural communities of this region, and seigneurial justice was deeply resented as costly, slow and preoccupied with the protection of noble privilege and status. Moreover, despite a royal reform of 1772 that sought to ensure the greater presence of the courts in the maintenance of the rule of law, the courts failed in that most fundamental function of any judicial system, to offer individuals security and a regular process to redress grievances. A peasant maxim of the day was that 'a bad arrangement is better than a good trial'; the *cahier* from Landraye agreed: 'it's the fable of the wolf and the lamb'. The 24 cases that Crubaugh studied at Tonnay-Boutonne took an average of 32 months to resolve, with average costs of 106 *livres*. This was a region where harvest dues were commonly levied at one-sixth or one-seventh of produce and constituted about half of the revenues of seigneurs – in one case 87 per cent. Seigneurialism mattered: at least 39 seigneuries in Aunis and Saintonge revised their registers of dues payable (*terriers*) in the period 1750–89.[24]

While seigneurial justice seems to have been regarded as expensive and oppressive in both Languedoc and Aunis-Saintonge, in Northern Burgundy