

H-France Review Vol. 8 (March 2008), No. 46

Peter McPhee, *Living the French Revolution, 1789-99*. Basingstoke, England, and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006. x + 319 pp. Maps, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$ 74.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0-333-99739-5.

Review by Edward J. Woell, Western Illinois University.

Whenever students in my western civilization surveys compose essays on how and why the French Revolution began, the writers usually fall into two groups. The first consists of those who failed to read the textbook and ignored lectures given by an instructor passionate about the topic. Such students explain that after centuries of oppression by clueless kings and uncaring nobles, a failed harvest became the tipping point for untold numbers of French peasants, who armed themselves with pitchforks and demanded their freedom. But students in the second group, namely those who read the textbook and even made sense of a lecture or two, write that a long-developing fiscal crisis came to a head, prompting a meeting of the Estates General in 1789 and with it the beginning of the French Revolution. Invariably I give the better grades to the latter.

But I must admit that reading Peter McPhee's latest scholarly effort has given me some pause about my own grading rubric. McPhee contends that the 1789 Revolution had an irrevocable impact on the people of France--particularly the nineteen-twentieths of whom were living in the rural communities of villages and small towns--and that this revolution came to be defined, in large part, by a process in which rural peoples were central. It is a difficult argument to make for two reasons. First, as McPhee himself acknowledges, he is swimming upstream against a torrid historiographical current. Eminent historians like Donald Sutherland, Timothy Le Goff, David Andress, and most notably, Richard Cobb, have argued that the French Revolution was a largely irrelevant affair to the vast majority of rural inhabitants.[1] Such scholars have often shown, moreover, that if rural peoples ever did find themselves caught in the revolutionary maelstrom, most reacted with revulsion, if not outright violence, toward the new regime. Second, McPhee also encounters the perennial problem of offering up evidence about a people who left very little written documentation. Frequently we must rely on indirect reports about what rural peoples did during the Revolution and just as important, why they did it.

Yet McPhee is far from the first to confront such historiographical and evidentiary obstacles and ultimately part ways with Cobb. As he also admits, Georges Lefebvre's study of the Great Fear helped to demonstrate that peasants were not passive in revolutionary events. More recently the work of Anatoli Ado, Peter Jones, and John Markoff has underscored the pivotal role of rural communities in one of the most important transformations of the revolutionary decade: the irreversible abolition of seigneurialism.[2] Even so, McPhee is more than just interested in showing how and why peasants mattered to the Revolution; he seeks to depict a complex give-and-take between revolutionary initiatives and a rural populace. As he puts it,

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 communities being acted upon, and only occasionally lashing out in violent retribution. . . . 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 change (p. 5).

To this end McPhee draws on a vast array of sources mostly from departmental archives, including family court records, petitions, correspondence both unsolicited and formulaic in nature, and deliberations and declarations from rural municipal councils. For this tome he undertook specific case studies in five diverse departments: the Orne, the Ain, the Aude, the Aisne, and the Charente-Maritime. Supplementing these with his previous studies of the Pyrénées-Orientales and the Hérault, along with monographs regarding rural communities written by other scholars, McPhee has a base of evidence wide enough to withstand the criticism that he is cherry-picking archival records.[3]

He begins the book by describing the Old Regime as experienced in villages and small towns. Here he uses the *cahiers de doléances* to great effect while acknowledging their limitations at the parish level. Central to McPhee's description is the seigneurial system and how those subject to it understood the institution. It is also here where he introduces an overarching theme in the book--the wide degree of social and political variations among rural inhabitants. In discussing the seigneurial administration of justice, for example, McPhee explains that in some areas (Saintonge and Angoumois) peasants saw seigneurial courts as oppressive, in other areas (Normandy) these institutions were moribund, and in still other areas (Northern Burgundy and Upper Brittany) rural peoples highly respected them. Yet even given these discrepancies, McPhee finds much similitude in rural and small-town *cahiers*, including universal hatred of seigneurial dues and concerns about natural resources, land usage, local ecclesiastical and educational institutions, and trade policy.

McPhee then takes up events in 1789 and 1790 and tries to demonstrate how, despite representatives of the Third Estate belittling or ignoring requests made by rural inhabitants in their *cahiers*, the voice of people in the countryside was ultimately heard. He not only considers the collective panic of the Great Fear, but also pervasive food rioting and anti-seigneurial attacks. In such actions McPhee finds an unprecedented sense of egalitarianism and hostility toward nobles and clerics and goes so far as to assert that [a]ll the evidence points to near universal participation in these extraordinary months of celebration and protest (p. 53). Also discussed here is the impact of new institutions created by the Constituent Assembly, most notably the formation of departments, districts, and municipalities.

Still another key reform for rural inhabitants was the reorganization of the justice system, which McPhee--siding here with Anthony Crubaugh--sees as highly advantageous for people of the countryside.[4] The book's comprehensive depiction of the rural reaction to early revolutionary reforms resembles a montage of, in McPhee's words, exhilaration, menace and resolve (p. 62). Many rural peoples lost economic ground due to the Assembly's inviolable protection of private property and the foot-dragging that arose in the wake of the abolition of privileges. Just for this reason many took matters into their own hands, especially when it involved matters of land usage and resource management. As McPhee explains, [t]he lived experience of thousands of rural communities was one of testing the boundaries for local advantage in the context of the new laws (p. 69).

Regarding the crucial period between passage of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy (July 1790) and promulgation of the complete Constitution (October 1791), McPhee points to several critical developments for rural inhabitants. The ecclesiastical oath crisis and the royal family's flight to Varennes had the effect of polarizing rural communities, causing some to turn against the Revolution as a whole, while augmenting anti-noble, anti-clerical, and anti-monarchical sentiment in others. Just as relevant to small-town citizens and villagers was passage of the Le Chapelier law and the Constituent Assembly's ongoing reluctance to dismantle all vestiges of the seigneurial system. All of these, however, paled in comparison to the repercussions of war beginning in the spring of 1792. The advent of hostilities unleashed rabid rural hatred toward nobles and clerics and pushed politicians and ordinary citizens alike toward the complete abolition of seigneurialism. The subsequent fall of the king elicited little shock or anger in the countryside and perhaps surprising to many scholars, McPhee shows that the September Massacres were not necessarily unique to Paris; ancillary killings took place in

numerous rural regions, with refractory priests and nobles being the most frequent victims.

As debate continued in the national legislatures over land tenure in 1792 and 1793, rural inhabitants often took it upon themselves to dismantle what remained of the Old Regime, albeit often in ways that displeased revolutionary officials. McPhee argues that while political attitudes varied across the countryside, underpinning attitudes everywhere was hostility both to the Ancien Régime and to bourgeois concepts of untrammelled rights of private property: the communitarian impulse was dominant (p. 116). Also at issue during this time, according to McPhee, were regenerative concepts about society, marriage, family, and women. Although rural communities were less affected by new divorce laws than were their urban counterparts, the former certainly felt the effects of the equal inheritance law passed in March of 1793. Inevitably war came to the countryside not only by foreign invasion, but also through the requisitioning of resources and draftees, to say nothing of internal rebellion in the Vendée. In spite of popular counterrevolution, McPhee depicts rural France as largely devoted to the republic when it was most under threat, as indicated by the referendum on the Constitution of 1793.

The Terror and the unparalleled centralization that accompanied it brought both hardship and opportunity for rural communities, according to McPhee. More land became available through the seizure of *émigré* property and some division of commons, yet this was more than offset by the injurious price controls embodied in the Maximum in September 1794. The scarcity of manual labor became an acute problem at harvest time, but at the same time it drove up wages for seasonal workers. Meanwhile, dechristianization had disastrous effects on local institutions and the demands of war caused the republic's new charitable initiatives in the countryside to wither. Still, McPhee is unwilling to see the Terror as exacerbating a breach between urban and rural citizens; he maintains that the urban-rural divide was not so clear-cut in actuality, and the Revolution continued to enjoy mass support in some areas (p. 149). He shows how many rural communities embraced the republic's new political culture, despite the regime's inability to provide adequate primary education, its tendency to suppress localized languages, and its unabashed destruction of the Vendée and other areas of popular counterrevolution and republican revolt.

McPhee then demonstrates how rural communities loomed large in the backlash of Thermidor in 1794 and 1795. The White Terror in southeastern France strikes him more as a civil war between political factions than a social division between urbanites and their rural adversaries. As the economy faltered and inflation exponentially rose, small-town citizens and villagers were especially hard hit. Yet many rural inhabitants, contends McPhee, remained dedicated to the republic--though again frequently on their own terms. Some, for example, sought to rebuild religious institutions from the bottom up, as women often assumed leadership when priests were absent. McPhee also argues that the Directory period from 1795 to 1799 was not as narrowly elitist and therefore exclusionary of rural citizens as traditionally thought. He acknowledges that war, inflation, resistance to renewed conscription, and poor administration left some areas of the countryside virtually ungovernable, particularly in the south. He is reticent, however, to accept that popular counterrevolution was rampant. It was not the Republic as such that was being spurned, McPhee claims, but rather the class politics of its self-perpetuating elite (p. 199).

In his conclusion, McPhee underscores why he takes issue not only with those who contend that daily life in the countryside remained largely unchanged during the revolutionary decade, but also with scholars like David Andress who represent the Revolution as inherently waged *against* the people. Specifically disputing several points of the Revolution's *légende noire*, McPhee dismisses the alleged disastrous effects on the environment, the massive loss of life, the widespread dissolution of families, and the irreparable loss of Catholic morality.

McPhee's book is a remarkable synthesis, providing compelling evidence that the Revolution left an

indelible mark in many areas of the countryside. That the Revolution often included a kind of negotiation between rural inhabitants and a centralized regime can hardly be disputed, as McPhee's many examples deftly show. His focus on both individual and communitarian agency in the countryside during the 1790s brings attention to one of the most underappreciated aspects of the Revolution and should become a basis for future research. The figures and detailed notes provided by McPhee, along with his exhaustive bibliography, assure that the book will be a solid reference for many scholars.

At the same time, though, it is far from clear that McPhee overturns what Cobb and others have argued about the relative intransigence of rural inhabitants during the Revolution. The problem in this respect is that for every example that McPhee provides about a given commune taking revolutionary or even counterrevolutionary action--and admittedly there are hundreds in the book--one is left to wonder if the thousands of unmentioned rural communes throughout the nation responded in a similar manner. This is not to suggest, though, that McPhee's study is purposely skewed or that his approach is inherently flawed. Rather, this problem speaks more to the enormity of the task that McPhee undertakes, not to mention the overwhelming difficulty of gathering precious little evidence left by rural communes during the Revolution that still remains intact. Otherwise put, this synthesis complicates, in a most productive way, our understanding of the Revolution in rural France, but it falls short of providing an iron-clad refutation of Cobb's take on the topic.

Somewhat related to this problem, moreover, is the absence in the book of a comprehensive political or economic geography of revolution in rural France. The reader is told of countless rural municipalities that responded to the Revolution in one way or another, but it is never made clear, by a map or otherwise, which rural regions in the nation mostly supported the Revolution and which largely opposed it, as well as which parts of the countryside were more socially and economically transformed by revolutionary reforms and which were not. [5]

Even if one accepts McPhee's revolution from below in the countryside, its relationship to the revolution from above"--better known, to be sure--is somewhat problematic here as well. The portrait that McPhee frequently renders is that revolutionary politicians in Paris issued a law or decree, and then the people of the countryside accepted, modified, or rejected it. Although this view grants agency to the people in the countryside, it overlooks the role that agency also played at the intermediate levels of the departments, districts, and later *arrondissements*. Now that we have a better conception of the Revolution in rural France, thanks to McPhee and others whom he cites, and our understanding of national political culture is more complete than ever, perhaps more attention should be paid in a book like this to how disparate revolutions from below and above actually converged and underwent their own kind of negotiation, particularly within departmental, district, and arrondissement administrations. [6]

Despite these concerns and regardless of whether one is apt to agree with McPhee about a revolution from below, scholars of the Revolution should read this valuable historiographical contribution and weigh the evidence and arguments for themselves. I doubt that the study will stop my own share of apathetic students from writing aimlessly about peasants armed with pitchforks, but it certainly will enable their instructor to have a better sense of how clueless and uncaring their study of the Revolution really is.

NOTES

[1] See, for example, Donald Sutherland, *The French Revolution and Empire: The Quest for a Civic Order* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003); Timothy Le Goff, *Vannes and its Region: A Study of Town and Country in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981); David Andress, *The French Revolution and the People* (London: Hambledon, 2004); Richard Cobb, *Paris and Its Provinces* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975); Cobb, *The Police and the People: French Popular Protest 1789-1829* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

[2] Georges Lefebvre, *The Great Fear of 1789: Rural Panic in Revolutionary France*, trans. Joan White (New York: Vintage, 1973); Anatoli Ado, *Paysans en Révolution. Terre, pouvoir, et jacquerie 1789-1794*, trans. Serge Aberdam, Marcel Dorigny et al. (Paris: Société des Etudes Robespierriestes, 1996); Peter Jones, *Liberty and Locality in France: Six Villages Compared, 1760-1820* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); John Markoff, *The Abolition of Feudalism: Peasants, Lords, and Legislators in the French Revolution* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1996).

[3] See McPhee, *Collioure 1780-1815. The French Revolution in a Mediterranean Community* (Melbourne: University of Melbourne, 1989); McPhee, *Revolution and Environment in Southern France: Peasants, Lords, and Murder in the Corbières, 1780-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[4] Anthony Crubaugh, *Balancing the Scales of Justice: Local Courts and Rural Society in Southwest France, 1750-1800* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2001).

[5] Note how Lynn Hunt depicted a political geography of the Revolution, though in her case she focused more on urban areas and revolutionary officials residing there. See Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*, twentieth anniversary ed. (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2004), 123-148.

[6] In my own work, for example, I consider the agency of district officials in the Loire-Inférieure (now the Loire-Atlantique), particularly regarding their actions toward local religious institutions. See Woell, *Small-Town Martyrs and Murderers: Religious Revolution and Counterrevolution in Western France, 1774-1914* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2003).

Edward J. Woell
Western Illinois University
ej-woell@wiu.edu

Copyright © 2008 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. No republication or distribution will be permitted without permission. ISSN 1553-9172