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A Reflection on John Merriman
June 15, 1946 – May 22, 2022

Peter McPhee

When John Merriman died on May 22, 2022, messages of grief and appreciation flooded the email and social media exchanges of colleagues and former students. He was a much loved and valued colleague, mentor and friend. Many messages recounted specific moments when John had reached out to them with his affable generosity. My own special memory is of my first day in the Archives Nationales in the Hôtel de Soubise in June 1974. In those pre-digital days, one had to arrive well before opening hours to be sure of a seat. Like legions of overseas researchers on their first day in those archives, I was apprehensive about my ignorance of the apparently arcane procedures. As we waited in the foyer, an older scholar (although I now know he was only forty-five years old) noticed my worried solitude and started chatting about our shared interests, before he was joined by an animated former graduate student. The kind older scholar was Charles Tilly; his student was John Merriman, like me then studying the provincial face of the Second Republic. John was soon staying with us near Perpignan, where I was researching. We sat on the beach at Collioure reading together Roger Price's *The French Second Republic: A Social History* (1972). I recount my small tale to express how fortunate we are to practice a profession which invites us to be part of an international community of scholars and friends. John became the first overseas historian I knew and a close friend for life.

John was born in Battle Creek, Michigan, raised in Oregon, studied at the University of Michigan and taught at Yale from the 1970s. He was a legendary figure there, renowned for his sporting passion and ability and for his love of music from the 1970s, especially the Rolling Stones. In John's words, "[I've] never written a thing without music on." I remember well visiting him in 1984 while he was Master of Branford College and finding him writing another chapter while simultaneously listening to the Stones and watching a football match on TV. Indeed, after his family and France, his passion for Michigan football was core to his life: he was known to travel from his French home in the Ardèche to Ann Arbor just to see his beloved Wolverines take on traditional foes Notre Dame or Ohio State.

This is not the place for a detailed discussion of John Merriman's remarkable corpus of historical research and writing, but four major contributions are evident, quite apart from his best-known book, *A History of Modern Europe since the Renaissance* (1996, third edition 2009), a major survey text for undergraduate history classes. He first came to the attention of historians of France when, shortly after completing his doctoral thesis on the Second Republic in the Limousin region, he edited *1830 in France* (1975). This collection, and in particular his

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introductory essay, remains the single most important revision of historical understanding of that period. It was followed soon afterwards by *The Agony of the Republic* (1978), among the 1970s wave of English-language studies of the revolutionary experience of the Second Republic seen from a provincial as well as national perspective. It was a model of its kind: succinct, lucid and yet aware of the complex interaction between local and national, social history and politics.

Second, *The Red City* (1985) and *The Margins of City Life* (1991), both translated into French, are outstanding examples of the way the social and political history written in the 1970s could be enriched by cultural history. The case-studies in the latter reveal John's sensitivity to the meanings embedded in ritual as a way of rereading the urban experience of social groups and ethnic minorities. The passages in his book on Limoges which analyse the distinctive cultures and rituals of porcelain workers and butchers are masterly examples of the interplay of social and cultural history. These books are characterized, too, by a quite extraordinary knowledge of place: no other non-French historian – and only a handful of French historians – has had such a rich understanding of the diversity of French cities. And no other historian could claim to have worked in every departmental archive in the country – or to be able to recall where and what he ate while staying there. His delight in culinary and cultural particularities was infectious.

Third, his acute knowledge of public spaces revived studies of revolutionary upheavals, notably in *Massacre: The Life and Death of the Paris Commune* (2014). Legions of students – both in classes and online – were captivated by his intimate knowledge of places and their denizens. There was no greater delight for him, however, than creating a second home in a village perched high above the Ardèche river, celebrated in his labour of love *The Stones of Balazuc: a French Village in Time* (2002), also translated into French. Behind its current status as one of “Les Plus Beaux Villages de France”, John uncovered the layered history of struggle and conflict, pride and honour enacted across its stony landscape. He loved that village, and the villagers in turn embraced him. A stroll through the village with him up to his favourite bar was always punctuated by gestures of friendship from those we passed.

Finally, John achieved the near-impossible, understanding how individuals and groups come to feel so angry that they commit acts of great violence but without sanitising the wreckage they leave behind. One of his best-selling titles was his 2009 book *The Dynamite Club: How a Bombing in the Fin-de-Siecle Paris Ignited the Age of Modern Terror*, a gripping account of how, in February 1894, a young radical intellectual named Émile Henry drank two beers at a smart Parisian restaurant, then left behind a bomb. This capacity for compelling storytelling which also probes the roots of hatred was demonstrated also in his last book *Ballad of the Anarchist Bandits: The Crime Spree that Gripped Belle Epoque Paris* (2017).

John had an easy familiarity with theoretical approaches, from that of the Annales school to the new cultural history, and was eclectic in his own tastes, from Richard Cobb, Charles Tilly and Peter Gay to Alain Corbin, Michelle Perrot and Yves Lequin. He was regularly called on by colleagues in France to deliver seminars and to sit on panels to assess doctoral theses. He was widely admired and respected as a colleague and historian there. His generosity and assistance to graduate students, and not just his own, was famous through his willingness to share his unparalleled knowledge of French archives and libraries. His enthusiasm for encountering new histories and cultures fuelled his insatiable desire for travel. He became a frequent visitor to Poland and historical adviser to its government, recognised in 2009 with the award of the “Medal of Meritorious Service to Polish Education” by the Ministry of Education. Australia was another special place for him, and his three trips here and involvement in the George Rudé Seminars created lasting connections with younger scholars. Some of his happiest moments were in

Melbourne's wine bars and at Australian football. Indeed, when he failed to enthuse about a recent win by our loved Magpies, I knew that he was very ill indeed.

John had an infectious sense of humour and storytelling, a love of companionship and a distaste for pomposity and hierarchy. Perhaps his long acquaintance with the bureaucracies that sought to control the unruly individuals at the heart of his histories developed in him a lasting mistrust of authority and of academics who become administrators. He was tactful about my years as Provost. Above all, he was a loyal and loving friend, a remarkable individual for whom his family was the emotional bedrock. He was devastated by the early passing of his wife Carol in 2016 but sustained by the love of two fine children, Christopher and Laura. He was deeply fond and admiring of them, never more so than in his final months when he relished both their new careers in overseas development agencies and above all how they cared for him.