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Jay M. Smith, *Monsters of the Gévaudan: The Making of a Beast*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011. 378 pp. Maps, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-674-04716-7.

Review by Jeremy D. Popkin, University of Kentucky.

First, the bad news: Jay Smith, author of a number of important books on early modern French history, makes no claim to have identified the celebrated “beast of the Gévaudan,” blamed for killing some sixty victims in a remote region of the Massif Central in 1764 and 1765. The good news is that Smith has used the copious documentation on the panic caused by the killings, which he assumes were probably due to a pack of wolves rather than a single man-eating creature, to give us a microhistorical analysis of why this particular set of deaths generated a widely publicized sense of crisis and how French society responded to this challenge. In addition, Smith shows how resurrections of the story from the late nineteenth century onward have reflected contemporary issues, from the Catholic Church’s attempt to defend itself against republican hostility in the late nineteenth century to present-day obsessions with human serial killers.

Key to Smith’s argument is the claim that the panic in the Gévaudan achieved prominence because it occurred in a very distinctive historical context. Wolf attacks, especially against isolated shepherds, were a constant hazard in early modern France and, indeed, well into the nineteenth century. The Gévaudan, a poor and thinly populated area whose peasants depended on their flocks for their livelihood, was particularly vulnerable to such depredations. When the wave of killings in the Gévaudan began, terrified peasants reported seeing an unusually large animal that seemed to transport itself from place to place with remarkable speed. Smith emphasizes, however, that the “beast of the Gévaudan” was not merely a creature of the popular imagination. The attacks occurred at a moment when scientific rationalism had not entirely excluded the possibility of what the naturalist Buffon called “anomalous beings,” strange hybrids or “monsters” that might possess extraordinary powers. Although Buffon himself remained silent on the subject, other specialists did not hesitate to discuss the possible nature of the mysterious creature. Religious authorities joined in, with the local bishop insisting that the beast was clearly the agent of divine punishment for France’s sins. With few exceptions, both elites and peasants dismissed the mundane possibility that the all-too-horrible killings were due to ordinary wolves.

If the beast of the Gévaudan came into being because science had not yet acquired the authority to exclude the possibility of monsters, the story took on added significance because it occurred in the troubled years following France’s resounding defeat in the Seven Years’ War. Smith draws attention to the role of journalists, especially François Morénas, editor of the *Courrier d’Avignon*, the region’s main newsheet, who was on the lookout for a sensational story to make up for the absence of war news. He also notes that several of the local seigneurs and military men who undertook to hunt down the beast had been associated with disgraced aristocratic commanders who had been blamed for the army’s dismal performance in the war. Demonstrating that they could kill a dangerous adversary offered them the prospect of redeeming themselves. Unfortunately, the efforts of the first two hunt commanders, the military officer Duhamel and the professional hunter d’Enneval, turned into fiascos, alienating the local

population and reinforcing the notion of a royal power and an aristocracy incapable of protecting their subjects' interests.

The third man put in charge of the hunt, Antoine, privately came to suspect that he was dealing with several wolves rather than with a single extraordinary mankiller, but he was reluctant to forfeit his own chance for glory by publicizing this possibility. When he succeeded in killing a large wolf in September 1765, he promoted the notion that his victim was the long-sought beast. The carcass was stuffed and sent to Versailles, where Louis XV and his courtiers had been following the story eagerly for many months, although the rather ordinary and poorly conserved creature's court appearance proved something of a disappointment. Peasants continued to be killed in the Gévaudan even after Antoine's success, but the government now repressed reports about these deaths. In place of a highly publicized hunt for a single monstrous killer, royal officials began to acknowledge that wolf attacks were a chronic problem throughout the kingdom and urged local authorities to make traps and poisoned bait part of a regular routine of animal control.

In the aftermath of the Gévaudan affair, Smith concludes, French scientists and bureaucrats, embarrassed by the demonstration of their own credulity, stigmatized belief in "monsters" as a form of superstition, fit only for women and the uneducated peasantry. France would never again tremble from fear of a supernatural beast. The story appealed, however, to romantic novelists and "all who found meaning in dark mystery" (p. 252). In the 1880s, the abbé Pourcher, a cleric at war with the Third Republic's secularism, revived the claim that the "beast of the Gévaudan" had been a divine malediction. His insistence that peasant reactions to the affair should be taken seriously fit with the period's interest in regional folklore. Twentieth-century preoccupations with human monsters led some writers to speculate that the killer in the Gévaudan might have been a serial murderer, rather than an animal. Interest in the tale remains alive, although most media versions of it pay scant attention to the historical documents on which Smith's own research is based.

Monsters of the Gévaudan is a convincing reconstruction of the "making of a beast," as Smith puts it. The Gévaudan affair was not as consequential as other crises of the period—the disastrous Seven Years' War, the struggle between the crown and the *parlements*, the rationalist challenge to traditional structures of authority—but Smith shows that it can provide a useful microcosm for understanding the nature of French society at a moment when older belief systems were giving way to new ones that would come to define modernity. Smith's claim that the outcome of the Gévaudan crisis truly marked the conversion of French elites to rationalism might be debated. The *loup garou* or werewolf still roams the French imagination, some French writers have defended the existence of the elusive *yeti* or abominable snowman, and other forms of irrationality, such as anti-Semitism, has certainly had their educated French supporters down to the present day. Nonetheless, Smith's book provides an admirable model for analyzing the roots of such beliefs and the importance of clarifying the contexts in which they flourish.

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