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John Merriman, *History on the Margins: People and Places in the Emergence of Modern France*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018. lix + 173 pp. Notes and Bibliographical Notes. \$30.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780803295896.

Review by Jill Harsin, Colgate University.

When John Merriman first began his historical studies, he made what sounds like a foolhardy vow: he would work in every departmental archive in France (p. xxviii). He kept that promise, in the course of which he found a new home, in the village of Balazuc, as well as one of his many subjects in an affectionate history of the town, *The Stones of Balazuc*. Though this retrospective collection, *History on the Margins*, is almost entirely a series of reprints of earlier articles--the one exception is the lengthy and fascinating personal memoir that begins the book--the work as a whole makes clear the passions that have driven Merriman's work.

Geography. Place. Tradition. Continuity.

As an archives-driven historian, inspired by the stories about obscure people that he finds often in small-town police records, or in the reports of low-level bureaucrats, Merriman is able to turn microhistories into astute analyses of society. As an historian who gets his hands dirty, he did not always like the direction of the profession in the late twentieth century: "Our craft went through a phase of heavy-duty 'new' cultural history, closely tied to the famous 'linguistic turn' ... At our conferences I sometimes wanted to cry out, 'To hell with this stuff--I want to hear about the Lot-et-Garonne, I want to hear about Alsace! I want to hear about seasonal migration!' ... it is absolutely essential to remember that real economic, social, political and cultural change alter the meaning of words and terms, and not the other way around. For all the benefits of new cultural history, the claims of history--of the real experience of people in place and time--were, I think, sometimes lost" (pp. xxxviii-xxxix).

This collection includes a number of articles, now brought together in one place, that are models of the merging of analysis and archival work. "The demoiselles of the Ariège" opened up a window onto traditional protest over the intrusion of capitalism. The curious fires in 1830 Normandy, mentioned in numerous contemporary sources, are revealed as a product of rumor, social and economic unease in a changing society, and--yes, on some occasions--proprietors trying to collect on insurance. The clannish butchers of Limoges, defending a centuries-old monopoly (despite the generally noxious quality of their street), had to give way to a new model of working-class solidarity.

In “On the Loose,” a study of rumors and fear of “red” conspiracies during the Second Republic, Merriman notes the illogic driving many of the anxieties. Were red woolen (phrygian!) caps a sign of defiance, or of the fact that it was winter? And panic over a supposed *conciliabule* in a mountain village was met with rare common sense by the prefect, who noted that it took an hour of climbing to reach the village, at which point one found “a church, the rectory, an inn and the house of the mayor who is a blacksmith.” It seemed unlikely that a banquet campaign was regularly challenging public order in this place (pp. 94, 92). Finally, “Some observations on the Transition to the Euro in France” is a primary source of sorts on the myriad pamphlets, advertisements, reminders, conversion charts, fears—and a surprising lack of nostalgia, against all predictions, for the franc: once the euro arrived, people simply wanted to get on with the euro.

In his introductory essay, Merriman takes note of the missing nineteenth century in contemporary studies: while those of us who started studying French history in the 1970s or so found the nineteenth century a critical moment in the transition from early modern to modern—the transformation of the economic conditions and expectations of villagers and small town France, the tentacles of the nation-state that reached into, and destroyed, or rather mutated, traditional customs—for those studies and questions, the nineteenth century was the place to look. However, as Merriman notes, the nineteenth century has had a rather sudden fall from grace: “one thing now seems perfectly clear to me. As time moves relentlessly along, the century between 1815 and World War I is in some ways far less visible than it was when I became a historian.” This fact was brought home to him when he was searching through a chronologically arranged history section in a major bookstore and realizing that “the sections now jumped from Napoleon to the Great War! What had happened to the long nineteenth century? (What happened to my books?).” He was finally directed to an obscure shelf, but noted that, “The revolutions of 1830 and 1848, which had so engaged folks like me for quite some time, seemed to have had their day” (p. xl).

Why has this happened?

It is tempting, in trying to evaluate what has happened to the study of the nineteenth century, to consider contemporary events. In retrospect, neoliberal economic policies from about the 1970s on have disrupted the traditional class-based political parties, creating the monstrous UMPS (UMP on the right, PS on the left), where little difference is to be found. Given that, the faith in parties, in trade unions, in any authority figures, as well as in the government itself, has been eroding in favor of a populism based on social media. Globalization has had the effect of agglomerating capital and income in the large cities; the periphery is now all of those who live outside of the great central metropolises. The *Gilets Jaunes* movement is a symptom of these abrupt changes, because what has at last ceased to characterize the places on the periphery is continuity, and they have, rather, had the abrupt shock of *mondialisation*.

Trains, schools, and the army were unable to change the strong traditionalism of the village: Merriman takes gentle issue with Eugen Weber’s “brilliant but misleading classic *Peasants into Frenchmen*,” which argued that the railroad, military conscription, and the educational system were the three “agents of modernization” that transformed France into a single country (p. xxix). But what these three agents could not do, globalization seems to have done.

As Merriman notes in the closing chapter of *The Stones of Balazuc*, “Balazuc’s demographic profile is not encouraging. More than a third (115) of the residents belong to the Club du Troisième Âge

(Senior Citizens Club). Relatively few young people remain in Balazuc. ...There is nothing for most of them in Balazuc.”[1] That kind of hollowing out of the countryside is happening throughout France. Young people are leaving and taking the schools, services, and secondary railroad lines with them.

As Merriman notes, in describing a key thread in his studies of France, “Geographic marginalization--the relegation to the periphery of unwanted activities and people--has been an important theme in [his] work” (p. xxxi). And this would seem to be a key starting point for future studies as well.

NOTE

[1] John Merriman, *The Stones of Balazuc* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), p.306.

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