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Tamara Withed, *Forests and Peasant Politics in Modern France*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000. xii +288 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$35 US (cl) ISBN 0-30-008227-4.

Review by Robert M. Schwartz, Mount Holyoke College.

This fine book shows that the natural hospitality of upland Savoyard peasants—immortalized in Rousseau’s *Nouvelle Héloïse*—did not extend to state forestry agents in nineteenth-century France. On their maps of the Ariège and those of Savoie after its annexation in 1860, foresters in Paris drew Cartesian grids marking the boundaries of “devastated” forests that needed to be restored. Invoking “public utility” as their warrant and the authority of the state to back it up, they announced their campaign: should communes and private owners fail to carry out the restoration on their own, the forestry service would take charge, appropriating tens of thousands of hectares of private or communal land for reclamation and reforestation. When local compliance was not forthcoming, the service duly proceeded to repossess the designated lands that, in their view, were regrettably “vacant.” Confident in their scientific knowledge and their aim, they devoted themselves to re-establishing the critical environmental functions of mismanaged and denuded forests in Ariège and Savoie. By absorbing the vast mountain waters their reforestation projects would tame the torrents that brought catastrophic flooding and destruction to downstream valleys and the plains further below. A grateful public, they believed, would praise their efforts.

In this *dirigisme* of design, impose, and restore, however, foresters paid little attention to upland peasants, to their livelihoods and customary rights. Far from being “vacant,” the lands at issue were essential parts of the peasants’ complex economy of field, forest, and pasture. When questions of ownership and appropriation arose, antagonisms grew and sometimes exploded. Whereas foresters thought in the narrower terms of “property” exclusively owned, peasants counted “possession” as an inalienable right—usufruct having the force of law. In Ariège and more extensively in Savoie, rights of access to pasture cattle, collect fallen wood, and cut timber for fuel, homes, or fences formed a tapestry of customary practice that overlaid the cadastral map of property ownership. The state projects that threatened such practice and peasant livelihoods met with determined, sometimes violent resistance that proved effective in deflecting, diminishing, or defeating the best-laid plans of Paris. In this contest of cultures, the struggle over the meanings and uses of upland forests and fields continued, and thus the well intended if myopic efforts at environmental repair were long stymied until an accommodation of local and national interests was achieved.

In her lucid, discerning history of struggle and eventual accommodation, Withed brings in aspects of environmental history to enrich the classic theme of state power and peasant resistance. In so doing, she

enlarges our understandings of these contests during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One such welcome enlargement is her argument about the meaning of peasant politicization. Less important than the ballot box and peasant voting patterns in national elections, politicization, she shows us, needs to be understood as something broader: the growing capacity of rural inhabitants to make use of national vocabularies and national concerns to promote and defend their own, local interests.

The details of her account begin with Colbert's efforts under Louis XIV to extend state control over the kingdom's forests. From there the account moves quickly on to the Forest Code of 1827, when Colbert's aims, she argues, were realized more or less well under the Administration of Forests and its growing numbers of para-military forests guards. In Ariège, however, resistance to the enforcement of a much-lengthened list of forest crimes was collectively organized and effectively pursued. As revealed by the War of the Demoiselles (1829-1832) and communally supported delinquency in 1848, strong, effective resistance grew from the dependency of uplands peasants on access to woodlands and pasture, rights and practices that the law often annulled or redefined as criminal.

The successful resistance of the 1830s and 1840s helps explain the more temperate efforts during the Second Empire, when catastrophic floods of 1855-6 prompted a new campaign. Recognizing that the highlands and lowlands were part of one environmental system--an interesting shift toward modern ecological understanding--the Administration of Forests sought to stem flooding with an ambitious project of re-forestation in Ariège and newly annexed Savoie. Although the project largely proved "an abject failure" (p. 83), some early signs of accommodation appeared underneath continuing peasant opposition. As the expanding forestry service hired more local men as forest guards, the state gained at least nominal supporters among the poorer segments of upland communities.

Chapters three and four take us to the Third Republic. Here, case studies of Jarrier in Savoie and Massat in Ariège reveal "the multicolored palette of [local] politics" (p. 216) that kept the "imperial" forestry service at bay. In chapter four, the most engaging part of the book, the colorful palette springs to life. In the upland commune of Massat, generations of struggle over the use of mountain woodlands and pastures culminated in a titanic battle of wills between Leon Galy-Gasparrou, a moderate republican mayor and national deputy, and François Piquemal, a militant defender of pastoralism. Using an inventive combination of intimidation and legal challenges in court, Piquemal engineered the mayor's defeat at the ballot box and the commune's victory over state reforestation as well. The struggle reached a crescendo on July 14, 1900, when the whole town was treated to a battle of voices, as each of the opposing factions marshaled their supporters to sing *La Marseillaise* louder than the other. By nightfall, Piquemal's belting troops had won the day. This is vivid microhistory animated by narrative skill. A fascinating tale well told, it could one day be playing at the cineplex, with (oversized) Depardieu (mis) cast as the fiery and shrewd Piquemal.

The final two chapters describe an emerging if partial accommodation in the shift toward increased cooperation between the state and local communities from the 1890s to the late 1930s. Here we learn that the extension of state control over the economy during the Great War continued into the 1920s along what proved an unexpected course. With enlarged powers and fortified will, the forest service looked with renewed determination on reforestation as part of the urgent post-war recovery. Realizing that both supplies of wood for rebuilding and environmental protection against flooding had to be greatly increased, it did not intend to compromise as in the past. Nonetheless, shifting circumstances made themselves felt. To stem the gathering pace of Alpine and Pyrenean out migration, the

reorganized Waters and Forest Administration softened its stance against traditional practices of grazing and woodcutting. Meanwhile, the Administration employed larger numbers of the peasants who remained, and communes began to solicit foresters' help to shore up protection against natural disasters. The age-old antagonisms between the state and upland peasants cooled and cooperation grew.

But even as this cooperation was emerging, concerns about colonial deforestation in Algeria and the efforts of well-meaning but class-bound voluntary associations generated new misunderstandings. These concerns about deforestation served to reinforce negative stereotypes of French mountain peasants as creatures with "pillaging and ravaging instincts" (p. 204). These negative views thrust themselves against a new but equally mistaken positive image of highland peasants, that of the fertile, mountain family whose numerous children would help restore the demographic strength of post-war France. At the same time, the Touring Club, the Alpine Club of France, and other urban associations of bourgeois hikers and skiers sought to re-make upland people and communities in their own image of clean and tidy--the better to make their mountain holidays healthy and pleasant. However different, these private reforming efforts reinforced the belief that pastoral peasants needed helping hands and the occasional, proverbial stick to enter the modern world. Although Whited argues that discussions of forest policy and practice suffered from these dissonant discourses, her portrayal of events in this period seems incomplete. Something further on the political and material conditions at the national and local levels would be needed to match the explanatory depth and persuasiveness of her earlier case studies.

Her examination of state policy and the cultural discourses of *dirigeants*, bourgeois reformers, and urban sporting enthusiasts serves a double purpose. As the author intended, it maps with a discerning eye the cultural landscape of environmental concerns in Ariège and Savoie during the first third of the twentieth century. With this cultural landscape in place, subsequent scholars can turn to the ecological landscapes of these regions to explore more closely the contested ground on which peasants lived. Several questions that Whited's account suggests call for further investigation. To what extent and in what areas did communal property and usufruct continue to exist? As Alpine populations declined, did the importance of these resources for upland peasants wane, thereby prompting not only compliance but cooperation as well? Did land use by peasants change over time as they adjusted to local circumstances and the external pressures of the market and state intervention? To sum up, how did peasant adaptations and state reforestation alter the ecology of these regions?

Investigating these questions would carry us further into a central theme of environmental history: the relationship of human agency and environmental change, of habit and habitat, of culture and nature. To start in Savoie one should turn first to the rich cadastral records for the region. A remarkable series, the collection begins with the cadastre of 1733, carried out under King of Sardinia for the duchies of Savoie and Piedmont. This complete inventory of every parcel of occupied land--the first in Europe on such a scale--was followed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by the Savoyard cadastres of the Napoleonic era (1804) and the Third Republic.[1] With these sources one could chart the changing distribution of private property, communal land, and state appropriations; the evolving mix of field, forest, and pasture; the decline of pastoralism and the rise of tourism as well as the environmental effects of these various shifts. For the Ariège, the cadastres begun under Napoleon and renewed during the Third Republic would presumably permit a similar investigation of change and continuity during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[2]

Those who set out to explore these questions have much to learn from Whited's intelligent book. The case studies of Jarrier and Massat serve to balance the top-down history that predominates in her account with colorful bottom-up narrative and analysis. There are points in her book to reconsider as well. For example, in underscoring the intrusiveness of state forest policy as embodied in the Forest Code of 1827 and later enactments, the author underestimates the degree of *general* control that was achieved under the tutelage of the eighteenth-century paternalist state. The issue here is one of geographic scale and context. Viewed across the grid of royal administration, such control was no doubt weaker in the periphery of the kingdom than in the more integrated plains. In the plains at least, royal *intendants* kept a vigilant eye on communal woodlands and exercised significant authority over the use and management of these and other communal resources. The extent of such regulation in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Savoie before annexation, treated in passing in Whited's pages, needs to be clarified.

To her credit, the introduction of issues in environmental history is a welcome initiative that others will hopefully take up.[3] Welcome also is the author's desire and ability to render empathetic historical understandings: to make the multiple outlooks and experiences of foresters, peasants, and bourgeois observers understandable from their particular perspectives in the past and not from ours in the present. In her vision of history, anachronism and presentism rarely appear.

Just as she resists projecting the present into the past, so she helps us see the visible past is in the present. As we learn in the conclusion, today Ariège and Savoie reflect the contrasting outcomes of resistance and accommodation that arose within different geographic and cultural landscapes. In the more peripheral and inward-looking Ariège the tradition of resistance endures in the department's rejection of the state plan to establish a national park in the region. In the more integrated and outward-looking Savoie—long the location of military and commercial traffic—residents readily accepted a similar plan that resulted in the recently established National Park of the Vanoise. Whether Savoyards generally will benefit as hoped from the development of tourism via the Vanoise remains to be seen. Nevertheless, that readers will understand these contemporary situations as the historical products of shifting contestations and negotiations involving multiple points of view and action is fitting testimony to Whited's historical craft.

NOTES

[1] The 1804 cadastre was undertaken when Savoie and Piedmont were part of the conquered territories under the Empire. As mentioned above, Savoie did not become a permanent part of France until 1860.

[2] For my knowledge of the Savoyard cadastres, I am indebted to my colleague and friend André Palluel-Guillard, the virtual doyen of the modern history of Savoie. He first showed me the ducal cadastre at the Departmental Archives of Savoie in Chambéry in 1996, and since then we have often talked about their use and promise as compared to their sad neglect by historians up to now. His recent presentation on the ducal cadastre at the Social Science History Association in Chicago (November 17, 2001) was also helpful. In my own work on rural Burgundy, I make use of the so-called Napoleonic cadastres of the early nineteenth century and their later revisions.

[3] A good example of this emerging sub-field is James Winter's *Secure from Rash Assault: Sustaining the Victorian Environment* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

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