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Edward J. Woell, *Small-Town Martyrs and Murderers: Religious Revolution and Counterrevolution in Western France, 1774-1914*. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 2006. 292 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography and index. \$32.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-87462-311-1.

Review by Alan Forrest, York University, United Kingdom.

Edward J. Woell's book is an interesting addition to a rapidly-expanding literature on the experience of the counterrevolutionary West during the French Revolution—the region that most consistently defied the republican policies emanating from Paris and which became so savagely and tragically embroiled in the civil war of the Vendée. It is a literature whose emphasis has changed quite dramatically since the 1960s, when political interpretations were overtaken by a vogue for social explanation, and the work of Charles Tilly and Paul Bois emphasised the social divisions within communities, explaining the choice between republicans and royalists, *bleus* and *blancs*, in terms of town-country tensions and the all-important struggle for land along the river valleys of the Loire and the Sarthe. What was sacrificed in such social interpretations, or was at most given a minor supporting role, was ideology and, in particular, religion, and it is this omission which a subsequent generation of writers, from Donald Sutherland and Tim Le Goff to Timothy Tackett and Jean-Clément Martin, have sought to make good.[1]

That is not to imply, of course, a simple return to the interpretation of yesteryear, which often identified the cause of western peasants with both Christ and King and gave little thought to the everyday realities of seigneurialism in western France. Rather they have pointed to a middle ground, which places relatively little emphasis on royalist politics or affection for the nobility, but which underlines the special place of the Catholic Church in the rural communities of the West. Jean-Clément Martin, in particular, has pointed to the central importance of the Vendean War—both the heroism of individuals in their resistance to the state and the horrors of the repression that followed, a repression that would forever be associated with the name of General Louis-Marie Turreau—in creating an identity for the region across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. And that identity, as he rightly points out—the identity that would surface so strongly during the commemoration of the bicentenary of the Revolution in the west—specifically identified resistance and religion, resurrecting the Sacred Heart as a poignant symbol of rebellion and sacrifice.

But can the importance of religious sentiment be demonstrated rather than assumed or taken for granted when discussing the rural West? Woell approaches this question from a local perspective, giving us here a history of one small town, Machecoul, and tracing that history over a sustained period so as to place its revolutionary experience in context. He does not, of course, claim that Machecoul is in any sense “typical”, if anywhere can be said to be typical in such a dispersed and divided region. In many ways, indeed, it had an exceptional experience of revolution, for here it was the counterrevolutionaries and not the republican *colonnes infernales* who committed terrible atrocities and slaughtered innocent civilians. If there were “small-town martyrs” to be counted in Machecoul, they were republicans, Jacobins even, people who would prove difficult to assimilate into a general history of martyrdom in the West. And their killers, wrapped in the Christian trappings of the Sacred Heart, were drawn from among devout Catholics. Machecoul's story was decidedly different from that of Les Lucs or Saint-Florent-le-Vieil, scenes of republican massacres and retribution. It scarcely fits with the Vendée's own image of these wars, and as such has been largely excluded from the process of commemoration and mythification, a fact which initially drew the author to visit and study the town. Yet, as he pertinently

notes, it was quite typical in other ways, since the massacre raised all the same issues of family rivalries, hatreds, petty jealousies, and divided communities which contributed to the bitterness of the conflict across the West.

Woell's account has the Catholic Church at its very core. Machecoul emerges as a priest-ridden society; the parishes around the town boasted an average of 1.84 secular clergy, in addition to small numbers of monks and nuns—Capuchin monks and nuns of Our Lady of Calvary—who performed key charitable and educational functions in the decades before 1789. Overall, he suggests, the clergy had weathered the crises of the Wars of Religion rather well, and Catholicism was deeply engrained in the ritual and symbolism of local life. But all was not well in the Catholic community. The bitter Jesuit-Jansenist struggle had left a permanent mark and divided the Christian faithful into irreconcilable camps. The local clergy were powerful figures in local society, while the determination of the diocese to centralise the Church's role in education and hospital care had the effect of dividing local people more than it united them. Besides, as in so many other areas of France, the Church had toughened its teaching, showing greater intolerance of local foibles and traditions, and placing greater emphasis on obedience, the catechism, and avoidance of sins of the flesh. The result was not to sap the base of Christian belief—even Machecoul's Jacobins remained largely loyal to religious faith, preaching their own versions of 'blue,' or republican, Christianity—but rather to add to the complexity of the dialectic dividing revolutionaries from their opponents. It produced a situation where the religious issue was fought over with powerful intensity, and where there was no appetite for compromise. The majority refused to swear the oath of loyalty that accompanied the Civil Constitution and became non-jurors after 1791. The problem for the Constitutional Church was finding others willing to serve in their stead.

By concentrating on a single community, the author can trace the successive changes in Catholic preaching and follow the individual careers of local clergy, and in this way he illuminates the impact of the Church and its teaching in the local community. But he cannot answer all the questions that present themselves. In spite of so much institutional information about the Church, so many texts of sermons from both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we don't really know very much about levels of faith, or the degree to which that faith can explain political responses. Nor do the archives allow him to disentangle in any detail the central event of the revolutionary decade in the town, the massacre itself. Who took part? Who died? Why did such an event take place here, in Machecoul, rather than in any other town or village in the West?

Sadly, we do not know with any certainty, since it has not proved possible to piece together the events of that bloodthirsty day or to produce a definitive picture. Often, indeed, Woell has no choice but to surmise from the available evidence, to imagine what might have happened, or to make deductions from the behaviour of other communities in the region. But if the experience of the conflict is still only partly understood, the ways in which it was remembered by later generations suggest that local people very quickly chose their master narrative to pass on to their children and keep a memory of the massacre alive. Or rather, they chose between two master narratives, two influential accounts of the events (one Catholic, the other republican), which gave clear if contrasting views of what people believed to have taken place and which have continued to shape opinion locally. Here Woell is fascinating, showing in an excellent final chapter how that memory was shaped, and how a community violated by a Vendean massacre quickly forgot the republican version of events, preferring to incorporate its suffering into that of an undifferentiated, martyred, Catholic West.

To explain this manipulation of historical memory, he returns to his starting point—the role of Catholicism in Machecoul—and presents the victory of a Catholic and royalist narrative in the context of a continuing dialectic between Church and State. He depicts a harsh and unforgiving Church, purveying in its services and sermons a black-and-white image of the past, and drawing on its Tridentine obsession with death, pain, and suffering. Under the Restoration these themes were especially prominent as the

clergy sought to re-establish their authority over the laity. The *ancien régime* clergy, it was emphasised, had prepared the people well to resist the iniquities of the Revolution, and the *ancien régime* itself was a golden age of obedience and a simple morality. Mission crosses were erected to remind the people of their religious duties, masses were said for Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette, confraternities were founded and expanded, and homage was solemnly paid to the town's own martyrs, like the former rector of Trinité, Hervé de la Bauche, drowned in the Loire during Carrier's notorious *noyades*, or the missionary Grignon de Montfort, widely held to have been responsible for the initial insurrection that expanded into what they saw as a full-scale Holy War against the infidel. The increasingly widespread use of religious symbolism, especially the Sacred Heart, underscored the Catholic myth of the Vendée and helped condemn the republican version of events, even in Machecoul, to oblivion. The town where atrocities had been committed by the rebels had become fused, rather conveniently, into a broader Vendée, its identity defined by deference to the clergy.

Edward Woell is most interesting when he explores the creation and development of this myth. He understands the nature of clerical influence in the community, and is excellent in teasing out the complexities of the mindset of both conservatives and revolutionaries in the small towns of the West. By concentrating on a single community he can examine the clergy at work, through the eyes of parishioners and in the work and the sermons of individual priests. The book is written in an unfussy and accessible style that makes it enjoyable to read, even if some might feel that it could have benefited from closer proof-reading of the French. There are perhaps rather too many non-agreements—such as “*bon patriots*” (p. 173), “*prêtre-habitué*” (p. 160), and “*équipe pastorale*” (p. 240)—and proper names where the copy editor's eye has wandered “Mitterand” (p. 246), “La Roche-sur-Yonne” (p. 247), “Cathlineau” (p. 253), or the delightful “Macheco” (in a picture caption on p. 216). But these are minor. This is a refreshing piece of research, drawing on very local archives as well as on a broad secondary literature. More significantly, *Small-Town Martyrs* is not just about Machecoul. It is an effective contribution to a wider debate, on the nature of rural religion and its place in inspiring insurrection in the West.

NOTES

[1] Among the books that have been key to our understanding of the insurrection in the West are Charles Tilly, *The Vendée* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1964); Paul Bois, *Paysans de l'Ouest* (Paris: Mouton, 1960); D.M.G. Sutherland, *The Chouans. The Social Origins of Popular Counter-revolution in Upper Brittany, 1770-1796* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982); T.J.A. Le Goff, *Vannes and its Region. A Study of Town and Country in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981); Timothy Tackett, *Religion, Revolution and Regional Culture in Eighteenth-Century France. The Ecclesiastical Oath of 1791* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); and Jean-Clément Martin, *La Vendée de la mémoire, 1800-1980* (Paris: Seuil, 1989).

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