
H-France Forum Volume 1, Issue 4 (Fall 2006), No. 4

Stuart Carroll, *Blood and Violence in Early Modern France*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 2006. xii + 369 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography and index. \$110.00 (hb). ISBN 0-19-929045-8.

Review Essay by James Collins, Georgetown University.

Violence may be as American as apple pie, but, after reading Stuart Carroll, the simile that comes to mind is *tarte Tatin*. Carroll's noble culture of violence and retribution sounds distressingly familiar. The tit-for-tat slayings, the entourage encounters, the poems and songs celebrating victory over one's rival or lamenting the loss of one's mentor or follower, the bravado, the obsession with respect and shame: that sounds pretty much like the highly publicized murders within the hip-hop world of the 1990s and early 2000s. The public demand for respect differs little from the scene at 1990s night clubs in Moscow, when the band had to strike up the theme from *The Godfather* every time one of the self-styled criminal kingpins walked in (entourage in tow, of course).

Nor has much changed in the last 1000 years. Georges Duby long ago described the retinues of knights of the eleventh and twelfth centuries as youth gangs. The most famous such gang, Roland and the Twelve Peers, memorialized in a *chanson* written during the height of the youth gang craze, laid waste to all of Europe in Charlemagne's name, before meeting their untimely demise in the "dark valleys" of the Pyrenees, at the hands of the "pagans", who worshipped Mohammed, Apollo, and, in some cases, the Devil. The *Song of Roland* contains many of the tropes Carroll describes, beginning with its outrageous calumnies against Islam in the opening *laisse*.^[1] The Roland poets offer warriors glory for defeating great enemies, Christian blessing for God's work, and material gain, from jewels to the greatest prize of all, Queen Bramimunde. Kill the husband and make off with property and wife: it's an old story, and Carroll offers some wonderful variations on it. Yet the Roland poets simultaneously demonize and dehumanize the enemy, much the way the contemporary American press dehumanizes "terrorists", or the way in which Carroll's noble opponents dehumanized each other or each other's family. Dehumanization of one's intended victims provides a leitmotif of much human violence, whether medieval, early modern, or contemporary; the technique transcends cultures in space, as well as time. Carroll implicitly questions whether violence is "elemental and inherent in human nature" (p. 5), yet, however much the manifestations, and level, of violence vary by culture, some of its elements repeat themselves almost without end. No matter what the culture, it seems that it is far easier to kill someone if you dehumanize your victim first.

Carroll's text contains much to contemplate in our efforts to reconstruct early modern French society. We can add duelling to William Beik's example of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes as another case in which Louis XIV seems more the moon than the sun, reflecting not generating light.^[2] One can only concur with Carroll's underlying premise that too many historians have suffered from the "traditional and erroneous assumption that monarchs and their nobles are in binary opposition,"^[3] (p. 4) but, in the wake of two generations of Anglophone scholarship, we can probably stop exorcising Mousnier's ghost (here myself pleading guilty to that satisfying pleasure). One would like to see in the opening pages a clearer statement of the profound difference on this point between the Anglophone and French historiographies, because the influence of the French writings of the 1960s and 1970s remains much stronger on French than on Anglophone scholars. The nobility and the crown did conflict on certain issues, but Carroll--building particularly on the fine work of Guy Rowlands about the French army--makes a compelling case for a symbiotic rather than a hostile relationship.

The strongest element of the conceptual framework surely lies with Carroll's expert dismantling of Norbert Elias' model of the 'civilizing' of the French nobility by the crown, especially at Louis XIV's Versailles.^[4] Earlier scholars have shown that the cultural role of Versailles has been vastly overestimated; Carroll takes dead aim at another of the shibboleths of the civilizing model, the curbing of noble violence. Nobles, especially young nobles, remained violent long after Louis XIV, as the figures Carroll cites on duelling in the eighteenth century make clear (see especially chapters eleven, thirteen, and fourteen). Some of the figures come from Billaçois' classic study,^[5] but they are superbly supplemented by Carroll's own research, especially Figures 11.1 and 11.2, drawn from his overall sample and from the pardon records of the Parlement of Aix.

Carroll's effective integration of the culture of duelling into the larger world of noble violence reveals both the strengths of his research and the somewhat less satisfactory presentation of it. His evidence suggests dramatic change in the seventeenth century, not with respect to duelling, but with respect to feuds. Some may be surprised by his use of the term feud in its classic sense—he uses a definition drawn from a study of Icelandic sagas—but he makes a compelling case. His massive collection of evidence should dispel any doubts about the prevalence of feuds among the early modern (or late medieval) French nobility. Nobles pursued these feuds by all possible means: lawsuits; threats; publicity; violence. Here again, one sees strong continuities with earlier times. True, the *cahiers* of the nobility at the Estates General of 1561 or 1576 demanded harsh punishment for rapt, and included it among those crimes for which they insisted the king no longer issue pardons, but, in this respect the sixteenth century differed little from the fifteenth. The malcontents of the War of the Public Good (1465) made the safety of noble womenfolk one of their primary demands, and, earlier, Juvenal des Ursins had castigated Charles VII for his failure to protect French women from the evil deeds of soldiers and others who took advantage of the chaos of the times.

Carroll's chapter on women begins with an unfortunate focus on a 1989 article by Sarah Hanley, whose conceptual premises have been largely abandoned by more recent work, such as that of Clare Crowston.^[5] His conclusions in chapter ten thus add evidence to existing interpretations (not cited by him), rather than blazing new ground. Carroll is surely right that the nobles took particular care about women and property: documents from meetings of the Estates General in 1560, 1561, and 1576 show nobles singling out *mésalliances* involving their daughters and widows. They insisted that gentlemen's daughters "losing sight of their honor" ("desvoyants de leur honneur") would lose rights of succession to the property of both their parents. As for noble widows who had children by their first (noble) husband, they were to lose the right to make gifts or sales of property if they "remarried to low people unworthy of their rank ("personnes viles et indigne de leur quallite") or to their valets or others who would have served their husbands"; all were to be forbidden to buy property from them.^[6]

Pierre de Blanchefort's journal of 1576-77 and other documents from meetings of various estates in the 1560s and 1570s show the enormous importance contemporaries placed on feuds, duels, and noble violence. The general *cahier* of the Estates, presented to the king in December 1576, asked him to stop: "pardons and remissions for murder (*meutre*) during war or for any murder (*assassinat*), theft, rapt and other enormous crimes, and if by chance any [pardons or remissions] are sent that it be forbidden to judges to pay any attention to them, on pain of loss of their positions. And as for pardons of justice ("graces de justice") they will henceforth be addressed, verified, and registered by bailiffs, seneschals or their lieutenants, without anyone other than the king having the power to give pardon in this kingdom."^[7] Reading Carroll's work enables us to see that this final comment was aimed directly at the canons of Rouen, whose privilege of Saint-Romain, dating back to the Merovingian king Dagobert II, allowed them to pardon one murderer a year, and came increasingly in the sixteenth century to be a favor sought by aristocrats for their loyal *serviteurs*. Carroll sees this pardon as a locus of conflict between the crown and the aristocracy (pp. 219-220), but the nobility as a whole certainly seem to have supported the crown's position that only the king should have the right to pardon.

The nobility and clergy regularly demanded that the king put an end to “duels and combats between gentlemen,” which were ruining entire noble families.[8] The nobles of 1576 had a specific proposal to deal with questions of honor, asking the king to establish a tribunal of honor in each bailiwick, staffed by the bailiff and four gentlemen. *Cahiers* from the Third Estate invariably demanded that the king curb noble violence, particularly violence committed by their retainers; in 1576, the Third Estate specifically requested that nobles be held civilly responsible for the violent acts committed by their servants. Blanchefort’s journal provides an excellent explanation for some of the quarrels over precedence, which bedeviled all public meetings: they served as a valuable weapon in the hands of those who wished to stymie political action.

Carroll provides abundant evidence of the complex motives behind these quarrels. Some duels involved little more than garrison town boredom; others, such as the notorious Tournemire-Anjony three against three in 1621, carried on family feuds that had lasted for centuries. Fittingly, that feud ended in a marriage that united the two families: marriage could both end a quarrel, by uniting lineages and property, and provoke new ones. Carroll makes the interesting decision to treat all of these feuds and duels by theme, so that specific cases pop up again and again in the text. That technique has its dangers. Some passages get repeated whole cloth (if sometimes in slightly different translation). The constant chronological shifting, moving ceaselessly across three centuries (fifteenth-seventeenth) drives home Carroll’s initial point about continuity, but sometimes seems to obscure a clearer analysis. By organizing his evidence this way, Carroll has consciously chosen to emphasize continuity and to destroy the individual narratives of feuds. Throughout the text, he offers a few examples in support of conflicting interpretations, showing well the variety of motivations, but less well their patterns and shifts therein (if any). The one discernible pattern, to which he makes passing reference in several places, is that society often yearned for civil tranquility after periods of intense internal violence, such as the long quarrel with Burgundy, the Wars of Religion, or the Fronde.

French nobles murdered each other with astonishing frequency. Moreover, as Carroll demonstrates, such murders regularly took place at the highest levels of the aristocracy. The period between 1560 and 1632 started with the mass executions of the Conspiracy of Amboise and ended with the execution of Montmorency; in between, one had the only two known assassinations of French kings and the murders of Coligny, of marshal Saint-André, of two princes of Condé, of two dukes of Guise, and of a Cardinal, to touch only upon the highlights.[9] Carroll’s many examples suggest two fundamental changes in the first half of the seventeenth century: first, the feuds died down, in terms of widespread military confrontations between entire families or groups; second, the great nobility stopped duelling. The feuds did not disappear, particularly in regions like the Southwest, but their numbers, based on Carroll’s anecdotal evidence, dropped sharply. Adversaries turned more readily to lawsuits, or, perhaps, to duels.[10] Although duels continued strongly into the eighteenth century, one no longer saw those at the peak of the hierarchy involved in them. On a broader scale, one might note that the Condé family fomented rebellions during minorities in the 1560s, 1610s, and 1640s, while the aristocratic malcontents of 1715 sought to take over the ministries of the Regency government, not to challenge it (or each other) in the field.

Some of the elements of Carroll’s tale transcend time and space. Anyone familiar with the bizarre American phenomenon of road rage understands the relationship among (dis)respect, shame, and violence -- violence, moreover, that often puts the offended party at extreme physical risk, much the way challenging a professional duelist like the chevalier d’Andrieux would have done. Similarly, one can hardly be surprised that people intent on doing violence did not follow the “rules,” whatever they were. The chivalrous sword fight is as ridiculous a conceit as the Old West shootout, where both men draw at the same time. Such events did happen, of course, but the vast majority of killings, as Carroll’s work demonstrates, took place according to the immemorial, golden rule of violence: do unto others before they do unto you.

NOTES

[1] Given that the version known to us was almost certainly composed by a Norman monk living in northern Spain in the late eleventh century, it seems to me unlikely that he could plead ignorance. The inaccurate portrayal of Islam is as deliberate as the change from Basques to Muslims.

[2] William Beik, *Absolutism and Society in Seventeenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

[3] Guy Rowlands and others have recently shown that a staggering percentage of male nobles in their 20s and 30s actually served in the armies of Louis XIV. Guy Rowlands, *The Dynastic State and the Army under Louis XIV: Royal service and private interest* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[4] Let me emphasize that Carroll does not throw out the baby with the bathwater; he recognizes the contributions of Elias and puts Elias' categories to good use in his analysis of socio-cultural change in noble attitudes toward violence, especially in chapter fourteen.

[5] Clare Crowston, *Fabricating Women: the seamstresses of old regime France, 1675-1791* (Durham : Duke University Press, 2004).

[6] Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF), Manuscrits français 16250, fol. 130v. This document, a seventeenth-century copy of the journal of the noble deputy, Pierre de Blanchefort, contains several examples of similar prohibitions in different cahiers and drafts of cahiers. The final version was the harshest, banning sales by widows who had made such marriage or who would make such marriages in the future.

[7] BNF, Mss fr 16250, fols. 199-199v.

[8] BNF, Mss fr 16250, fol. 45v, nobles in 1576; BNF, Mss Fr 16262, fols 95v-96v, articles 122-123, clergy in 1560.

[9] I say "known" because I've always had my suspicions about the "hunting accident" that conveniently killed the last Carolingian, while he visited the estates of Hugh Capet.

[10] Carroll makes it clear that a good number of duels in the early seventeenth-century evolved from long-standing feuds; what happened after that is less clear.

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See also the Review Essays on this book by Kristen Neuschel, David Parrott, and Jonathan Dewald, as well as Stuart Carroll's response to all four Review Essays.

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H-France Forum Volume 1, Issue 4 (Fall 2006), No. 4

ISSN 1557-7058