

---

H-France Review Vol. 15 (October 2015), No. 144

W. Gregory Monahan, *Let God Arise: The War and Rebellion of the Camisards*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 320 pp. \$115.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-19-968844-9.

Review by Carolyn Chappell Lougee, Stanford University

The Camisard War is too little known, its significance for the reign of Louis XIV too little understood. This violent popular insurrection, which consumed the remote mountains of the Cévennes in Languedoc from 1702 to 1710, was the last holy war of the French Reformation, the largest rebellion of Louis XIV's reign after the Fronde, and the last local insurgency before the relatively pacific decades leading up to the Revolution. Gregory Monahan's deeply researched and beautifully written *Let God Arise* promises to bring this war from the margins of historical memory to a central point in pre-Revolutionary history where multiple threads of religious and secular, local and national, authority and resistance, past and future converged. What he shows about this one social revolt invites a broad rethinking of all that transpired in France when Louis XIV set out to destroy Protestantism.

The Camisards were young peasants and artisans of both sexes who took up arms to destroy the Roman Church, liberate their king from its clutches, and rebuild the Reformed Church that the Crown had swept away with the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. Deprived by the Revocation of temples, pastors, and even lay preachers, they developed a radical millenarian and apocalyptic theology that rested on the belief that Prophets in their midst enjoyed direct inspiration by the Holy Spirit. Following what the Prophets conveyed as the Word of God, they defended their religious demands with a "cold-blooded ferocity" (p. 1) unknown elsewhere in the era of the Revocation. Brutal terror campaigns on both sides targeted individuals and whole populations. Protestant armies burned churches and whole villages that harbored them, fingering priests and Catholic faithful for murder. Catholic vigilantes mobilized Protestant-killing expeditions against the "heretics" who, in their view, were rebelling against God. The ferocity of the attacks derived precisely from the intimacy of the two faiths' coexistence: each side knew who among their neighbors were of which faith and who had resisted or thrown in their lot with the authorities. And the alacrity with which each confession came to demonize the other with rhetoric that had once flourished openly but had been eclipsed many decades earlier showed "how close it was to the surface of their consciousness" (p. 256) despite a fragile veneer of coexistence during the era of the Edict.

Monahan provides a narrative of the war that is truly distinguished for the critical judgments he applies to the contradictory testimonies and diverging interpretations of key events that have long held sway on the two sides of the doctrinal divide. Often, it is the archival record that allows him to shed new light—especially the Chartrier Tocqueville accessible in the Archives Nationales (which includes the intendant Basville's correspondence) and the ministerial dispatches (especially between the Crown and its agents on site) located in the archives of the Armée de Terre in Vincennes. At other times, comparing accounts armed with common sense or a close knowledge of the topography and the personalities in question suffices to dispel partisan fictions.

Perhaps because his sources are weighted toward official communications and postwar self-justifications, Monahan does relatively little to open up broad questions about the character of the war as a "true

---

religious civil war” (p. 256) between co-resident populations: to the reasons why the fissure between confessions sharing this one locale was so toxic and so intractable, when Protestant and Catholic neighbors elsewhere co-existed peacefully during the era of the Edict and even upon the Revocation. Indeed, Monahan’s story is less an encounter between confessions at the popular level than a dance of death between the state and the rebels, neither one of whom had any chance of understanding the other. Especially revealing is the way Basville’s understanding, or misunderstanding, of the conflict he spent a decade putting down hindered his dealing with the situation. Highly intelligent and well-educated, situated by his rationalism and pragmatism “on the cusp of the Enlightenment” (p. 3), Basville never attained a clear grasp of the rebels’ grievances and objectives because he was incapable of pushing past their prophetism, which could only repel him as fraudulent, mad, or ignorant and in need of correction through discipline and instruction. His conventional assumptions about social order—that it functioned through hierarchy, privilege, and patron-client ties—made him incapable of understanding the sources from which the popular grievances sprang: he never ceased attributing the rebellion to a non-existent secret conspiracy of local nobles with Protestant pasts who had refused to join the absolutist system of patronage and clientage or been excluded from it.

The far-reaching implications of the story Monahan tells are principally three. First, it exposes the thinness of the overlay of national upon local, even at the end of the Sun King’s reign. Students of absolutism understand well that the Crown needed to gain the cooperation of local elites by serving their interests in order to enhance its own. But the Camisard War demonstrates as well how intransigents outside the absolutist consensus could force the Crown to temporize, improvise, even give in to resistance. Intent upon other objectives—especially, realizing his dynastic ambitions through the War of Spanish Succession—Louis XIV showed himself surprisingly indifferent to this rejection of his authority within his own realm and repeatedly agreed to grant amnesties to those who led it.

Along the same lines, the relationship between the Crown and its agents in Languedoc reveals how strongly Louis delegated to and deferred to his appointees on the ground, at least when he had in place an agent as competent and reliable as Basville. In default of resources and direction from the center, Basville had—like it or not—a “remarkably free hand” (p. 262). The workings of “absolutist” government scarcely matched, in this case, the picture Basville’s collateral descendant Alexis de Tocqueville would paint of it a century later.

Finally, Monahan’s analysis poses a whole host of questions that should be applied more generally to Louis XIV’s drive to destroy Protestantism. The rebellion in the Cévennes has typically been set apart from the story of the Revocation elsewhere because its ideology contrasted so sharply with orthodox Calvinism and because it embraced violence that Huguenots elsewhere eschewed. Moreover, as Monahan points out, conditions before and after the Crown’s rethinking of anti-Protestant policies in 1698 differed significantly. The run-up to the Revocation occurred in a period of peace (the conclusion of the Dutch Wars in 1678 having released troops for use in the conversion campaigns) and with a stronger controlling hand at the center in Louvois, who had left the scene by the time of the emergency in the Cévennes. Still, the *modus operandi* Monahan reveals on the part of the Crown may have been truer of the earlier phases of the anti-Protestant campaign than the usual narratives assume. How much did Louis XIV care about resistance in the 1680s? Which aspects of resistance did he care more or less about: clandestine assemblies, private reading of the Bible and singing of Psalms at home, emigration? How much did he delegate to officials on the ground, whether generally or differentially in various cases? Was the persecution—the dragonnades, forced conversions, and separation of children from parents—“as brutal as Protestant legend has made it” (p. 18)? By focusing on these transferable questions, Monahan contributes not only to new clarity on the War of the Camisards but to an emerging renewal of clarity on the larger struggle over French Protestantism that will enhance its place in French memory.

Carolyn Chappell Lougee  
Stanford University  
[lougee@stanford.edu](mailto:lougee@stanford.edu)

Copyright © 2015 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172