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David Hopkin, *Voices of the People in Nineteenth-Century France*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. xiv + 296 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$99.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-521-51936.

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Ever since Jules Michelet, cultural and social historians of modern France have tried hard to listen to the voices of the people, the sources of their work as well as the objects of their interest. The problem is, there are so few, if any, representative, first-hand accounts by non-elites. By their very nature, the literate few were exceptional figures: Jacques-Louis Ménétra, Flora Tristan, Martin Nadaud, and Jules Vallès, among many others. Until the end of the nineteenth century, illiteracy limited the redactions of the unexceptional many, especially in the countryside, far removed from urban records; and even then, ethnographers who ventured into *la France profonde* to collect their words often had agendas, such as the promotion of a national identity, that distorted their versions of the oral traditions they sought to record.

Creative approaches to these problems are notable; Martine Segalen's interpretation of proverbs, Robert Darnton's reading of fairy tales, and Eugen Weber's marshalling of nearly every direct and indirect source available on rural France created as many methodological problems as they attempted to resolve.[1] Other historians and ethnographers who followed in their wake have been more circumspect, reining in their ambitions for the sake of accuracy and corroboration.[2] In his new book, David Hopkin joins these more judicious scholars seeking to bring recent social and cultural history into closer alignment and to paint precise portraits of rural life, its power relations on the land and at sea, in nuclear and extended family households, and in response to institutions like the state and the church. The results of Hopkin's explorations may be less sweeping than his predecessors, but they are more impressive in their judicious use of sources and the conclusions he draws from them.

Hopkin's monograph is as much about historical methods as it is about the lives of specific communities whose oral-ethnographic sources can be checked against other records. As the author says in the first paragraph, "I am proselytizing for a 'folkloric turn' in history" to break free of the master narratives of the nation-state and of industrialization in the nineteenth century (p. 1). His thoughtful introduction and conclusion make the case for the micro-historical approach he takes in the five case studies that constitute the core of the book, using a methodology more in keeping with the history of the ancien regime than with that of post-revolutionary France. The result explores the possibilities of folklore as performance to escape the iron cages of cultural, as well as socio-economic determinism. The result is also a liberating account of the negotiations of the powerless with elites: "A song or a tale may have been just as directed as an appeal to a judge, just as calculated as a pauper's letter. However, they were part and parcel of the more routine elements of existence, such as work and travel, and so were more closely related to the language of everyday communication, the voice that the poor adopted when speaking to their peers, as well as to their 'betters'" (p. 14).

A good historian, Hopkin is appropriately skeptical of ethnographic sources. They are not always reliable and their redaction reflects the interests of the folklorist. In the hands of romantics and

Marxists, these sources are little more than the yearning for the national soul or the conflict of social classes, respectively. More recent scholars seem to have found the historical significance of the social act that each performance represents in “eco-types,” revealing “patterns of cultural preferences at the level of community, occupation, ethnic group and region” (p. 27). According to Hopkin, exemplary evidence can be found in the inventories of folk songs and stories edited recently by teams of ethnographers.[3] The historian puts these sources to good use in the rest of his book: “My argument in what follows is that small, face-to-face but hierarchical communities, reliant on the cooperation of kin and neighbours, and dependent on the exigencies of the environment, require different communicative strategies from those of the educated, individualist consumer of the modern West” (p. 29). In short, these strategies are “designed to avoid confrontation and retribution” invariably because inequalities of power and resources could be devastating for the storytellers and their communities (p. 29).

After this methodological introduction, Hopkin turns his attention to five different locales where folkloric evidence supports this contention, viz., the fishing village of Saint-Cast in Brittany (chapters one and two), the villages of the Moselle occupied by Germany after the Franco-Prussian War (chapter three), the extended Briffault-Chaumereuil households of Montigny-aux-Amognes in the Nièvre (chapter four), the peasant laborers in the Stéphanois region (chapter five), and the Vellave lace-making communities in the Haute-Loire (chapter six). The ethnographic sources include the stories told by different informants, with significant variations defined by gender, about the perils of work at sea; riddles posed by young women and answered by suitors in rural courtship rituals; the tales recounted by members of an extended family about the power dynamics of peasant households; the work songs of peasants without access to their own land; and songs sung in the religious sodalities of women lacemakers. In every instance, Hopkin teases out the everyday working and familial relations of rural communities in which the give-and-take of performers and their audiences recount their social and cultural circumstances.

The first two chapters, on the tales of coastal Brittany, as told to Paul Sébillot, the best-known folklorist of the Third Republic, constitute the longest and most thorough case study in the book. Although the stories resemble fictionalized autobiographies, they shed valuable light on the communicative strategies of the tellers in specific settings, especially when verified by what else we know about the informants and their audiences from the *Inscription Maritime*. This latter source, established by Colbert in 1668, created a register about every Frenchman who made a living from the sea. In a commune characterized by endogamy and matrilocality, thanks largely to the high rates of male mortality, the tales as told by the women were about fear and loss, friendship, generational solidarity, religiosity, and the transformation of the community into a tourist mecca towards the end of the nineteenth century. On the other hand, the tales as told by the fishermen were much more about the hierarchy of treacherous work at sea and the efforts to maintain a sense of control in a hostile environment that killed as many as 2 percent of all sailors every year. Depending upon whose story was being told, both men and women developed their own romance, one which lent them a sense of agency they otherwise lacked in their actual lives by and on the sea. For Hopkin, this “narration was not just a pastime, it was an operating system within a face-to-face community” that enabled communities of men and women to cope with powerful external threats to their very existence (p. 107).

The remaining chapters take the same careful approach to the folkloric artifacts and other, verifiable historical sources. In each case, the results are narrowly framed and rarely range beyond the situational context of the rural storytellers and songsters and their immediate audiences. That good scholarship forms the basis for the trust his own readers place in his balanced, well-informed judgments on complex problems raised by the folklore, but also by social historians who have taken other approaches to the same questions. In chapter five, especially, Hopkin revises Roland Mousnier’s controversial “society of orders,” which did not include peasants, on the basis of agricultural work-songs and their historical vision: “peasants... did possess a language, a set of symbols, with which to articulate a sense of their own identity,” one which illuminates “some of the mysteries of their collective behavior” after 1789 (p.

187).[4] They simply broke with the Third Estate, just as one would expect from the widely sung “pauvre laboureur,” “a vocalized *cahier de doléances*... a list of complaints... to whoever might be listening” that constituted a peasant vision on the eve of the Revolution (p. 201). “The ‘peasant vision,’” Hopkin argues, “was not just a ‘discursive reality’: it was an ideological understanding of society which could form the basis of mobilization, but only as long as function trumped class” (p. 208).

At moments like these, Hopkin’s methodology suggests its potential for significant contributions to modern French historiography that would otherwise not appear in his close studies of social and cultural developments at the local level. At first blush, the author’s accounts of the historical relation between the micro- and the macro-levels, between continuity and rupture with the past, do not promise much. But with patience, the reader is taken, step by step, through the ethnographic evidence, the cumulative results of which build to more remarkable generalizations. According to Hopkin, “The established unities of time and space that so often predetermine the shape of historical investigation are largely conventions to make the life of scholars easier: they may have absolutely no importance in the lives of the historical actors we study” (p. 260). And so it is with politics and the national categories that politics assumes. These categories, too, need to be re-negotiated among historians so the very objects of their study would recognize them.

If I have a reservation about Hopkin’s method, it lies in the different ways literary historians think about the stories and songs, which he does not really take into account. Catherine Velay-Vallantin, for one, has considered in considerable detail the mutations and transformations of popular stories that should give Hopkin pause in his relatively static notion of ethnographic sources. Writes Velay-Valantine, “[t]he tale, inscribed in the *longue durée*, is not for all that an unchanging object.”[5] There is considerable variation in the stories that people tell over time, not just because of shifting personal and historical circumstances but also because of the cultural life of the stories themselves. The tales have a logic of their own that Hopkins needs to address, I think, to confirm the effective utility of folklore and the ethnographers who recorded it.

But this is a cavil about a remarkable achievement. Hopkin’s book deserves the attention of many more historians than those practicing the social and cultural history of rural nineteenth-century France. Besides its immediate interest to anthropologists and ethnographers, *Voices of the People* is essential reading for historians of women, gender, and the family; scholars of social relations, hierarchies, and power dynamics in small communities; students of popular culture and religious practices; researchers of national identity and historical memory; and many others. This book richly deserves a broad and thoughtful reading.

NOTES

[1] Martine Segalen, *Love and Power in the Peasant Family: Rural France in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 1-10; Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), pp. 9-74; and Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1976), pp. ix-xiii, 485-496.

[2] The following titles critique approaches taken by Segalen, Darnton, and Weber, respectively: James R. Lehning, *Peasant and French: Cultural Contact in Rural France during the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 5-6, 209; James Fernandez, “Historians Tell Tales: Of Cartesian Cats and Gallic Cocks,” *Journal of Modern History* 60(1988): 113-127; and Charles Tilly, “Did the Cake of Custom Break?” Center for Research on Social Organization, University of Michigan, Working Paper No. 189, at <http://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/handle/2027.42/50963>.

[3] See Paul Delarue and Marie-Louise Tenèze, *Le Conte populaire français. Catalogue raisonné des versions de France*, 4 vols., 2nd ed. (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2002) and Patrice Coirault et al., *Repertoire des chansons françaises de tradition orale*, 3 vols. (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 1996-2007).

[4] See Roland Mousnier, “Les concepts d’ordres, de états, de fidélité, et de monarchie absolue en France de la fin du XVe siècle à la fin du XVIIIe,” *Revue historique* 247(1972): 289-312. Cf. Pierre Goubert, “L’ancienne société d’ordres: verbiage ou réalité?” in Pierre Goubert, ed., *Clio parmi les hommes* (Paris: Mouton, 1976), pp. 281-286.

[5] Catherine Velay-Vallantin, *L’Histoire des contes* (Paris: Fayard, 1992), p. 39.

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