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Anne Jollet, *Terre et société en Révolution: Approche du lien social dans la région d'Amboise*. Paris: Éditions du Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques, 2000. 549 pp. Maps, tables, notes, and bibliography. 38.11 € (pb). ISBN 27355-0396-8.

Review by Alan Forrest, University of York.

Anne Jollet's research aims to recreate a sense of how rural society worked in eighteenth-century France by examining those elements that provided ties between individuals—in particular, its social structure, its attitude to space, and the relationship of its inhabitants to the land. This is a social history of the countryside in a small region of Touraine, but it is a social history that has advanced beyond the traditional class descriptors so popular with historians of the peasantry in previous decades to take fuller account of community and community values. She believes that these were important to rural dwellers at the time, and from the *cahiers* she concludes both that social categories were terribly imprecise in the countryside and that there was a surprisingly general concern with what today we would term environmental questions. The author is herself the descendant of small winegrowers from the area, and in her discussion of the rural community a note of affection is evident, an affection that shines through the complex and at times rather dense statistical sources she has used. The result is a highly revealing study of rural society as a whole, one that will stand alongside the other *grandes thèses* that have been devoted to the French countryside in a proud tradition that stretches from Pierre de Saint-Jacob in Burgundy and Georges Lefebvre in the Nord to Paul Bois in the Sarthe and Guy Lemarchand in Normandy, to encompass more anthropological and geographical studies such as Anne Zink's on rural Aquitaine. All are concerned in their own way to explain the behaviour of the eighteenth-century peasantry and to make sense of peasant responses once the Revolution came to the countryside in 1789 and destroyed many of the traditional assumptions of rural life.

The first task in tackling a history of this sort is to establish the extent of the terrain that it is sensible to analyze, and in making that choice the vision and methodology of the historian are already evident. Many of the previous French specialists on the countryside chose large administrative regions, whether *ancien régime* provinces such as Provence or the smaller revolutionary *départements* that took their place in 1790. In either case, they were opting for what was essentially an administrative division, one that had less to do with agricultural habit than with the demands of governance. Or else, like Peter Jones's study of the Lower Massif Central, one can opt for a geographical area, one held together by its contours and landscape, its crops and farming traditions. In either case the result is a considerable sweep, a study that seeks to generalize about farming methods and peasant politics across wide parameters. At the other extreme there are the true microhistories, studies which treat village communities in isolation, which look at individual motivations and allow for a whole raft of local and family archives to be explored. Each has its value and brings particular insights, depending on what questions are to be posed, what behavioural patterns to be explained.

Jollet's principal focus is on social relationships and on the often subtle changes that affected man in his environment across the period of the Revolution and Empire, years when so much of what had previously been taken for granted in the countryside was finally challenged and disrupted. She seeks to study individuals, ordinary people in their communities, and therefore wants to get down to a very local

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level. But her individuals are more than people trapped by their economic status. Her approach is to study individuals in society and the nature of the interactions between them, to survey the space they occupied and analyze the use they made of it, to examine their behavioural patterns and their *comportements* towards one another or, as she defines it, “*saisir l’homme dans son environnement social, par la place qu’il occupe dans des réseaux de relations avec les autres*” (p.9), something that can take many different forms. This is an approach that is culturally and environmentally aware, a social history of the countryside that is in the tradition of Bernard Lepetit’s discussion of towns. She justifies her choice of period and place on the grounds that this is a time and an environment where change and movement can most easily be detected, thanks to the overthrow of existing legal codes, the control of food prices, and the dramatic expansion of the property market through the sales of noble and church lands as *biens nationaux*.

And her choice of place? No doubt the fact that it was the land of her forebears played its part, but far more important is the variety of questions which it allows her to ask. The exact boundaries of her study have been very carefully defined to form a small region, incorporating the town of Amboise on the Loire, a declining linen manufacturing town of some 5,000 inhabitants, and about 16 rural communes—in all some 15,500 people in 1794, or the administrative space of two cantons. It is too big an area to allow for a full-blown microhistory, yet small enough to allow the historian to calculate with rare accuracy the extent of change, of land purchase, of social promotion and opportunity. It allows the author to see from close quarters the interaction of town and country, the relationships that developed between the people of Amboise and those of its rural hinterland. And it allows her to give full weight to questions of geography and the environment. Added variety comes from the fact that the area contains different and contrasting cultures, since some, but only some, of the communes were primarily viticultural. Others depended on arable farming and on the river trade along the Loire. In wine-growing areas there was an increasing population, which in turn increased pressure on land. Indeed, Amboise itself benefited from the expansion of wine-growing, since vineyards now stretched into its suburbs and employed a significant number of its people. That inevitably impacted on urban mentalities and on town-country relationships, and it adds another complexity to social relationships in the area.

Anne Jollet’s thesis focuses particularly on the land market between 1780 and 1811, years of high activity, in part because of the revolutionary sales of *biens nationaux*. The picture across the region was very uneven. In all there were 2,039 transactions involving sales of *biens nationaux*, but only 800 purchasers, with one man, a *juge* from Amboise, dipping into the market on twenty-six separate occasions (p. 490). In the villages seigneurial lands were usually more significant than clerical ones, whereas in Amboise itself Church properties accounted for as much as 15% of total holdings; putting them on the market in the Revolution added the equivalent of around twenty years’ worth of normal sales. There was an increase in bourgeois purchasers, of townsmen buying up peasant holdings in the way Bois highlighted in the West. But most vendors and purchasers were local, with outsiders, and especially townsmen, making very patchy inroads into the market. Over the whole thirty-year period, she shows that most of the transactions remained what they had traditionally been, the buying and selling of small pieces of land by peasants who were forced into the market by debt and the exigencies of cash flow or who sought opportunities to augment their holdings. Many of them bought and sold on a short-term basis because of simple need, something that was especially prevalent among *laboureurs* in agrarian communes.

That is not to imply that the abolition of feudalism and the subsequent sales of noble and seigneurial lands were insignificant, merely that the impact was very variable even in the neighbouring villages of a small area of France. At a time when the total amount of land changing hands rose spectacularly, the part played by *biens nationaux* averaged some 15 percent across the region, though locally, in Pocé, this figure was as high as 40 percent. Artisans and bourgeois from the towns bought up rural properties when they became available, and they, of course, had not the same need to sell. Again Jollet stresses the significance of ecology and the environment. The level of bourgeois incursion would appear to depend

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not on parish divisions or the size of rural populations, but rather on the nature of the “micro-societies” that constituted them. In particular, outsiders tended to follow communication links, buying more property in communities that lay along major axes, both the river Loire and the major road to and from Amboise.

What Anne Jollet provides here is a convincing and nuanced picture of a rural community in flux, caught between the destruction of the privileged structures that had given shape to *ancien régime* society and the limited democratization of land which the Revolution brought in its wake. The countryside around Amboise was fairly densely populated by eighteenth-century standards, and the *taille* records allow her to go below the surface and define more precisely the groups who appear as unprivileged, who are often clumsily defined as “country-dwellers” or “peasants.” What she describes is a fascinating “*micro-société*” where these “peasants” turn out to be two-thirds vineyard workers, where around 20 percent were employed in trades, and where others worked in the factories of the town. The effects of urban growth and of the French Revolution were also different between communes and between ecologies. Though wine-growing communities were not wealthier than agricultural ones, they proved more resilient in times of adversity, less dependent on selling property to survive the agricultural year. Indeed, wine-growers tended more than peasants and farm workers to dip into the land market and to buy *biens nationaux*. And because their soil was poor and the quality of their wines mediocre, their lands were simply less attractive to outsiders, to those urban bourgeois who were looking for profitable investments in the countryside. This had political effects, too, since it meant that they generally survived the Revolution with less trauma and discontent.

Anne Jollet’s book, which started life as a doctoral thesis under Michel Vovelle at the Sorbonne, is packed with statistical detail, and like many theses it may not always make for easy reading. But it proves its worth. Without her detailed examination of land-holding and land sales it would be impossible to discriminate between peasants and communities to this degree or to draw the nice distinctions she does about their social and moral values. Her book is far more than just another local study. It makes an interesting contribution to environmental history in general and, more specifically, to the already complex debate about the impact of revolutionary change on the French countryside.

Alan Forrest  
University of York  
aif1@york.ac.uk

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