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Graham Robb, *The Discovery of France: A Historical Geography from the Revolution to the First World War*. New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2007. vii + 455 pp. Maps, figures, notes bibliography, and index. \$27.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN: 0-393-05973-1

Review by Steven Kale, Washington State University

*The Discovery of France* has received a great deal more attention than most books on modern French history. It has garnered praise in the mass-circulation press both in the United States and the United Kingdom, with reviews appearing in *The New York Times*, *the New York Review of Books*, *The Nation*, *The Guardian Observer*, *The Spectator*, and *The Independent*.<sup>[1]</sup> Robb and his book were featured in November 2007 on Authors@Google for a 50-minute public lecture, still available on YouTube, where he was asked by an eager crowd of book lovers about his favorite region and the hazards of bicycling in Paris. At the local Barnes and Noble in the little college town where I live, there are less than a dozen titles in French history on the shelf; Robb's book is most prominently displayed, along side works by Burke, Tocqueville, and Alistair Horne.

Although it is too soon for *The Discovery of France* to have been widely reviewed in the major scholarly journals, the response it has elicited among scholars of modern French history has been uniformly negative, even indignant. The best example of this to date is David Bell's excellent commentary in *The New Republic*.<sup>[2]</sup> This contrast in the book's reception prompted me to contact W. W. Norton in the hope of speaking to someone in the publicity department in order to get a sense of why the press believed the book would have broad appeal. Since no one returned my calls, I am left to speculate that the editors at Norton marketed aggressively because Robb is a talented writer with a proven track record; he has seven books to his credit, including studies of French poetry, literature, and sexuality, and celebrated biographies of Balzac, Hugo, and Rimbaud. It seems certain that French historians (myself included) are likely to repeat many of Bell's cogent observations—the book's errors and omissions are, after all, fairly obvious. But I think that we can also learn something about the factors separating professional historians and the history-reading public by reviewing the reviews as well.

Robb tells much the same story as Eugen Weber in his now classic *Peasants into Frenchmen* (1976), in which the isolation and diversity of the French countryside was diminished in the half century prior to the First World War by economic modernization, political integration, and cultural homogenization.<sup>[3]</sup> In Robb's more pessimistic account, France struggled to maintain its true identity in the face of the centralizing nation-state by preserving a vast network of micro civilizations, where multiple customs, languages, and beliefs were able to endure until the second half of the nineteenth century, even as modern systems of transportation, communications, and bureaucratic uniformity worked relentlessly to wipe them out. This "undiscovered continent" of small *pays* was eventually mapped, surveyed, studied, and refashioned politically and physically by Parisian elites who erased local cultures and imposed urban prejudices on what they regarded as "a shapeless mass of human raw material" (pp. xvii-5). Part One describes the populations of pre-modern France, their languages, migrations, daily practices, folklore, and religious sensibilities; Part Two tells the story of a halting yet increasingly successful process of internal colonization, during which map makers, geographers, anthropologists, road builders, politicians, teachers, tourists, and capitalists simultaneously discovered, eradicated, and grew nostalgic for a disappeared country.

Robb's central argument at first seems contradictory. On the one hand, he portrays the extraordinary diversity and isolation of the French countryside, presenting readers with "a collection of tales and tableaux" (p. xvii) evoking not only the richness of France's many small communities but the strangeness of an unfamiliar world. On the other hand, he insists that this society was "recognizably French," and that something as homogenizing and artificial as a French identity not only existed but survived the disastrous impact of modernization. Robb resolves this paradox by arguing that for France isolation and fragmentation have historically been its "unifying feature" and even its salvation: parcellization saved the rural village from the centralizing tendencies of the Revolution; the isolation of tiny hamlets shielded them from the hazards of change, from shortages and unrest in the capital; and the existence of many small communities allowed the countryside to protect itself "from the effects of global trade and economic migration." According to Robb, "there is nothing obviously implausible about the idea that France was held together by the ant-like activity of small holders rather than by the grand schemes of Napoleon Bonaparte, Napoleon III or François Mitterrand" (pp. 95-97). Robb's notion of French identity, therefore, is linked directly to what he sees as France's unique path of development. It suggests neither an essential quality of sameness nor a simple set of shared beliefs, but rather the variety of practices and attitudes appropriate to having lived for centuries "a little world of simple things" (p. 346). The persistence of localism created habits that have resisted the economic, cultural, and ecological catastrophes of modernity, so that the French remain themselves even today by dint of having inherited the capacity to preserve and remember, even unconsciously, a way of life called into being by the extraordinary diversity of their original civilization.

Robb fails to engage systematically with the existing scholarship on rural France because he presents his research as a personal journey of discovery into *terra incognita*, one in which "four years in the library" was supplemented by fourteen thousand miles of "exhaustive research" on a bicycle seat [xvi]. This failure has struck specialists in French history as Robb's most egregious sin. As David Bell points out, Robb cites the work of the great names of European and American scholarship—Fernand Braudel, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Natalie Davis, Alain Corbin, Lawrence Wylie—"in a scattershot way" without learning much from them or acknowledging any debt.[4] Although the four-volume *Histoire de la France rurale* (1975), edited by Georges Duby and Armand Wallon, appears in Robb's bibliography, it is rarely cited. Nor does Robb cite recent research by a new generation of rural historians who have been rethinking a field that has attracted diminished interest since the cultural turn of the 1980s.[5]

Although Robb repeats many of the arguments in Weber's *Peasants into French*, he does not discuss the debates that Weber provoked and ends up accepting a scheme of periodization and a set of dichotomies—archaic/modern, rural/urban, isolation/integration—that have either been modified or rejected. As Jean-Pierre Jessenne points out in his recently published synthesis of modern and contemporary French rural history, the idea of the "closed world of the village" implies that all change came from the outside and was imposed on passive rural inhabitants, which is precisely the image of the countryside Robb rejects in wanting to show that the peasantry was not "a shapeless mass of human raw material, waiting to be processed by the huge, mutating machine of political interference and turned into the people conveniently known as 'the French'" (p. xvii). Especially after 1880, the rural population cooperated and collaborated with the Republic to shore up family farming and the basic structures of peasant agriculture in the face of a prolonged economic crisis and two world wars. Such cooperation was institutionalized in the Ministry of Agriculture and extended with the rise of agrarian syndicates and the passage of the Méline tariff, which is generally acknowledged to have secured an alliance between the Republic and its rural electorate. Moreover, Weber's argument that peasants were not "nationalized" politically until the Third Republic has been shown to be way off the mark. Beginning with the Revolution of 1789, peasants repeatedly acted in their own political interests at both the local and national levels. Their political engagement was further prompted by important local electoral reforms during the July Monarchy, by the Guizot Law of 1833, and by the general political mobilization of the Second Republic.[6] By retaining Weber's basic narrative in order to invert it rhetorically, Robb ends up, in Bell's words, "resuscitating a vision of pre-modern French rural life that serious scholarship

has by now thoroughly discredited, while missing the ways in which this scholarship has rendered the subject...far more complex”.[7]

Sloppy research, an inconsistent bibliography, and literary conceit has led Robb to make a number of errors, most of which Bell has carefully identified. In the first part of the book, Robb flattens out the diversity he wishes to bring to life by ignoring regional and chronological distinctions and by adopting generalizations that cover the entire country, making every isolated pre-modern hamlet both exceptional and representative of “most of the country” (pp. 20-21). He criticizes literary sources as elitist and tries to represent the provinces as a world hostile to the city and dominated by the rhythms of nature, only to deliver a deeply romanticized portrait of French life that reflects nineteenth-century myths about rustic charm, village tribalism, and stoic peasant virtues. At the same time, he uses Romantic literature as empirical evidence and fails to critically evaluate travel accounts, novels, guidebooks, and contemporary histories with regard to context, political bias, or artistic convention. Robb’s description of popular religious practice and peasant work habits will strike any early modern and modern French historian as especially misguided (pp. 109-10, 136-37). His assertion that “[f]arm work usually took up no more than two hundred days a year” (p. 101) as well as his op-ed article to *The New York Times*—in which he claimed that “As soon as the weather turned cold, people all over France shut themselves away and practiced the forgotten art of doing nothing at all for months on end”—prompted Vivian Gruder to send an incredulous response to the editor, pointing out that “inside the homes and shacks during the winter peasants spun thread, wove textiles, knit socks, and engaged in other economic activities to supplement their income from agriculture”.[8] Robb has also been criticized for both minimizing and exaggerating pre-modern and nineteenth-century linguistic diversity, for either downplaying or overemphasizing the role of the central state in rural France before and after the Revolution, and for mischaracterizing various aspects of peasant seasonal migration.[9]

The pervasive ahistorical anti-modernism of *The Discovery of France* is almost as irritating as its scholarly inadequacies. Robb’s vision of the real France is thoroughly romantic, a place where the permanent and unassailable fends off the artificiality of civilization and where geography deflects historical change. It is also a country in which the real forces at work are ultimately mysterious, inscrutable, and beyond recorded history, where no one knows where the essential elements of life began. In such a place, what is old is always better, so that dogs in eighteenth-century cities constituted “a cheerful part of life,” while the dogs in modern Paris foul the streets (pp. 148, 179). As this enchanted land disappears, Robb poses as its defender, standing up for simple rustics in the face of a patronizing middle class, refusing to condescend in the manner of the city folk for whom peasants are stereotypically toothless, stunted, and slow-witted. Not surprisingly, Robb gives a favorable account of what economic historians used to call French “economic retardation,” denying that the transportation revolution represented “steady progress,” describing industrialization as a nightmare, and generally characterizing the creation of a modern economic infrastructure as an ecological disaster (pp. 154, 175, 215-16, 265-68). Robb’s politics reflect this general orientation, condemning modernity as the complete and irreversible transformation of the physical world in which the state, urban elites, and abstract ideologies conspired through the agency of an environmentally insensitive bureaucracy to refashion the world in a manner hostile to simple virtues, modest hopes, and genuine emotions. The Revolution, according to Robb, was a “bloodbath,” nineteenth-century regimes were arrogant, and the aspirations of “progressive politicians” rarely corresponded to those of “most people” (pp. 302, 347).

Robb’s ideological preferences forestall a sustained treatment of the nineteenth century, despite the book’s promise to survey the history of France “from the Revolution to the First World War.” Most of the story Robb wants to tell is situated in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century because it is here that he sees most clearly the struggle between a vibrant lands of *pays* that had not yet disappeared (p. 319) and the forces of integration, whose ingenuity periodically faltered in the face of France’s intractable fragmentation. As a consequence, most of his sources refer to this period (Arthur Young and Victor Hugo seem to be his favorites) and trend to skew his sense of periodization in ways that both

minimize the role of the central government in French life before 1789 and accelerate the destruction of *la France profonde* in the forty-four years prior to the First World War. In 1870, he suggests, market integration “hardly existed,” while by 1914 France had become a “national machine” (p. 350).

His insistence on a connection between the persistence of microcivilizations and French identity leads him to ignore the question of why this story is distinctively French and not a more general phenomenon characteristic of pre-modern societies (Robert Tombs points out that “A similar process could doubtless be described for Transylvania, or the Po delta, or ever the Cambridgeshire fens”).[10] It also explains why Robb has a hard time admitting that economic progress involved trade offs: commercial agriculture reduced the variety of plant and animal life (p. 298) but it made food more abundant, sustained a larger population, increased life expectancy, and decreased disease and malnutrition; slower travel allowed people to smell the roses, but railroads created a higher standard of living and a lot more jobs. It may be that France used to be more picturesque but historical scholarship is not equipped to take sides in an aesthetic debate about the downside of modernity. Slow growth may have preserved a distinctive way of life in France longer than elsewhere, economic modernization may have brought devastation to both forests and large wild mammals (pp. 172-76), but it created the world that made possible the production of the bicycle that Robb so enjoyed.[11]

These problems make it all the more interesting to discover that those who reviewed *The Discovery of France* for the mass media, including two popular historians, three literary scholars, and one barrister, found it to be fascinating, rigorous, and well composed. *Publishers Weekly* praised Robb for his “scholarly diligence” and *The Telegram* called his book “a meticulous discovery of France.” Ruth Scurr insisted that “Robb is strict with himself,” that he worked scrupulously, and tempered his nostalgia with “steely realism”. [12] Caroline Weber credits Robb’s “exhaustive research” and his talent for correcting misconceptions, while Andrew Hussey assures us that Robb has written a “brilliant overview of France past and present...that tells us much more about the complexities of being French than any scholarly work”. [13]

Hyperbole in promotional literature has to be expected, just as one must acknowledge that book reviewing is to a certain degree adjunctive to a commercial enterprise, regardless of the reviewer’s academic credentials. It must also be granted that Robb has produced a very evocative and beautifully-written book, and that reviewers who are not professional historians cannot be expected to care about the same things as the readers of H-France or *French Historical Studies*. Caroline Weber, for instance, was quite taken with the fact that Robb drew his material “not just from the usual array of scholarly sources” (whatever limitations that may imply). [14] But the contrast between the response of historians and that of others offers an occasion to wonder why so many have found *The Discovery of France* so attractive. On one level, the appeal is entirely stylistic: Robb writes non-fiction with the instincts of a novelist, describing a lost world in fascinating detail while casting the research process as both an intellectual voyage and a personal quest.

More important, however, is the contrast he establishes between his work and that of university historians, whom he accuses of treating its human subjects as material for “statistical processing” (p. xvii), as if historiography was still stuck in the 1970s and the revival of the narrative, microhistory, and the cultural turn never occurred. Postmodernism, cultural theory, and subaltern studies have for a long time portrayed the historical discipline as part of a larger normalizing ideological enterprise bent on legitimizing capitalism, racism, sexism, environmental destruction, and state power. Robb’s gesture in this direction makes history a cog in the machine of modern discovery, responsible along with map making, deforestation, and the Enlightenment for draining the world of color and mystery, eradicating diversity, regimenting nature and turning it into “a blur beyond the TGV window,” electronically lit and digitized, like the “soft-focus graphics of Google Earth”. [15] Robb evokes this romanticized country not only against the monotony of modern life but against the rapacious and self-important elites on whom historians have obsequiously lavished too much attention. “France,” he declares, “means

something more than Paris and a few powerful individuals" (p. xvii), and he is anxious to show that his "sympathies are with the 'faceless millions' who live in the vast diverse land" remote from the capital, where patronizing, parochial, and ignorant tourists prepare for excursions into the countryside so that they can gawk at the peasants.[16] According to Scurr, Robb shows us a France that no one has seen before: not the France of "stately historical narrative that builds from one intense period of transformation to the next," but a France that is "decentered, disaggregated and wildly divergent; off the map metaphorically, historically, and literally".[17]

French historians should take comfort in the fact that the appeal of Robb's book has nothing to do with its scholarship, even if it also seems to rest on a misunderstanding of what we have been doing for more than sixty years. Its appeal has more to do with the ideological proclivities of the time and with the opinion of a certain segment of the Anglo-American middle class, for whom Robb's anti-modernist green progressivism has broad resonance. I suspect that many well-educated professionals share Robb's love of small-scale democracy and localism, his ardent environmentalism, his desire to make the world hospitable for animals, his allergy to the pre-packaged standardization of modern life, his support for the 35-hour work week, and his preference for more commodious forms of travel. They are also probably fond of regional cuisine, organic produce, *terroir*, the anti-globalization movement, and the small pleasures of the French way of life.

#### NOTES

[1] Caroline Weber, "Tour de France," *The New York Times*, November 4, 2007 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/04/books/review/Weber-t.html>, December 17, 2007); P. N. Furbank, "Who are 'The French'?" *The New York Review of Books*, Volume 54, Number 19, December 6, 2007 (<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/20854>, February 19, 2008); Ruth Scurr, "Terra Incognita," *The Nation*, December 10, 2007, 22-28; Andrew Hussey, "Liberty, Equality...and Grim Reality," *The Guardian Observer*, September 9, 2007 (<http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/history/0,,2165224,00.html>, December 17, 2007); Jonathan Sumption, "Triumph of the Clerks," *The Spectator*, October 10, 2007 (<http://www.spectator.co.uk/the-magazine/books/246491/triumph-of-the-clerks.thtml>, December 7, 2007); David Coward, "The Nation as Destination," *The Independent*, September 14, 2007 (<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-discovery-of-france-by-graham-robb-464235.html>, January 30, 2008).

[2] David A. Bell, "Bicycle History," *The New Republic* (February 13, 2008): 43-46.

[3] Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1976).

[4] Bell, "Bicycle History," 43.

[5] Shortly after *The Discovery of France* was released, Philip Whalen wrote to H-France, declaring that the book should be reviewed on the website in light of the "dire necessity to point out just how much recent (and older) scholarship on rural France is not credited." Not being a rural historian myself, I emailed Whalen privately and asked him to suggest important recent works on rural history that Robb ignored. He mentioned his own work on Gaston Roupnel, as well as books and articles by Caroline Ford on landscape, Kolleen Guy on Champagne, Patrick Young on Tourism in Brittany, and Tamara Whit on forest ecology, among others. He told me that "All of these works illustrate how much rural studies have evolved beyond the quaint, the exotic, or the essential kernel of some French identity," noted that Robb has not bothered to read "the bulk of the French historical geography canon," and pointed to the large amount of recent work on French regionalism published by *French Historical Studies*

that Robb has missed.

[6] See Jean-Pierre Jessenne, *Les campagnes françaises entre mythe et histoire (XVIIIe-XXIe siècle)* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2006) and Robert M. Schwartz's review of Jessenne in *The American Historical Review* 112:5 (December 2007): 1621-22.

[7] Bell, "Bicycle History," 43.

[8] Graham Robb, "The Big Sleep," *The New York Times*, November 25, 2007 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/25/opinion/25robb.html>, February 26, 2008)). Gruder shared her letter with subscribers to H-France on December 9, 2007, but it was never published.

[9] Bell, "Bicycle History," 43-46.

[10] Robert Tombs, "The Discovery of France," *The Sunday Times*, August 19, 2007, ([http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/books/history/article2263977.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/history/article2263977.ece), January 30, 2008).

[11] Robb's editorial taking issue with President Sarkozy's antipathy for the 35-hour work week gives us a good sense of the economic trade-offs he would be willing to entertain. He suggested that Sarkozy "should consider introducing tax incentives for hibernation" in order to achieve such "long-term benefits" as "reduced energy consumption" to offset the economic costs of conservation. Robb, "The Big Sleep."

[12] Scurr, "Terra Incognita," 22.

[13] See Weber, "Tour de France"; Hussey, "Liberty, Equality...and Grim Reality."

[14] Weber, "Tour de France."

[15] Scurr, "Terra Incognita," 22.

[16] Tombs, "The Discovery of France."

[17] Scurr, "Terra Incognita," 22.

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