

Legends and the Peasant History of Emancipation in France and Beyond

Who emancipated the European peasantry? Other aspects of the process that ended the agrarian Old Regime might be debated, but the answer to the question ‘who’ appears straightforward. Europe’s peasants were emancipated in a series of state acts stretching from Charles-Emmanuel III’s edict concerning ‘The freeing of property subject to feudal obligations’ (*l’affranchissement des fonds sujets à devoirs féodaux*) in ducal Savoy in 1771 (suspended by his successor Victor-Amadeus III), to Prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza’s decrees abolishing serfdom in the Romanian provinces in 1864 (Blum 1978: 216–218, 375–376). Credit often accrued to particular heads of state, such as the ‘tsar liberator’ Alexander II, responsible for the 1861 Emancipation Proclamation in Russia (Moon 2002: 56–69). Even in the case of revolutionary states, emancipation came from above. It was the French National Assembly, during its dramatic evening session of 4 August, 1789, that abolished the feudal regime, along with many other kinds of legal privilege. What the August Decrees meant in practice in the countryside took some time – and not inconsiderable violence – to work out, but the direction of travel was clear (Markoff 1996: 428–515). The French revolutionary regime was by its very essence hostile to the existence of separate legal estates within the polity, and (with some exceptions) wherever its power extended the abolition of serfdom and feudalism was enacted. Other European states such as Prussia (1807) and Bavaria (1808), in awe of the energies that the Revolution had unleashed, followed suit.

So we know the answer to the question ‘who emancipated the peasants’ – it was governments, autocrats, states. But why European monarchs and states chose to emancipate the peasants is less clear. In the case of France, Marxist historians such as Georges Lefebvre and Albert Soboul argued that it was the revolutionary bourgeoisie, embodied in the Third Estate (which had declared itself the National Assembly in June 1789), that sought through this action to free up the factors of production – labour, land and the capital it represented – though both were also interested in the ways that peasants themselves shaped the process (Lefebvre 1929, Soboul 1983). However, it is less easy to detect the active role of the bourgeoisie in the decisions of Frederick VI, prince-regent of Denmark, responsible for the abolition of the *Stavnsbånd* in 1788 (Horstbøll & Østergård 1990) or Tsar Alexander I’s decision to end serfdom in Estland, Kurland and Livland (1816–1819) (Plakans 2011: 183–198). Other historians have posited the development of an enlightened public sphere in the

late 18th century, in which educated members of the nobility and the middle classes both participated. From this world of enlightened debate emerged a new political culture of natural rights and citizenship that cannot be understood as the ideological property of any one social group, but which had its own intellectual and cultural power to mobilise supporters. Hence one finds aristocratic landowners, the very people who one might imagine had the most to lose from emancipation, at the forefront of reform: it was the declarations of the vicomte de Noailles and the duc d'Aiguillon which initiated the bonfire of privileges on the night of the 4 August 1789 (Fitzsimmons 2003: 13); Nikolai Miliutin, noble landowner and serf-holder, drafted the Emancipation Manifesto of 1861 (Lincoln 1977). A third answer might emphasise the developing significance of the state and its own concerns in this period, independent of either noble or bourgeois interests. A peasantry free of the labour demands and economic burdens imposed by the landowning nobility could become a citizenry of taxpayers and conscript soldiers. Thus there is no contradiction in enlightened despots acting as peasant liberators any more than there is in revolutionary assemblies; in this domain the French revolutionaries were the continuation of the absolute monarchy rather than its negation (or so argued Alexis de Tocqueville more than 150 years ago).

There is much else that historians do not know about peasant emancipation. We are not really sure what feudalism and serfdom meant in practice, at least in western European countries. How heavy feudalism weighed on individual peasants is very hard to calculate, not least because the forms it took were so many and varied. Compulsory labour charges might be converted into payments in money or in kind. There were also the lords' monopolies, one had to use his mill, his wine-press, his bread oven, his justice.... Lords made claims over what peasants considered common land: the pastures, the woods, the water courses. Feudalism also included more-or-less symbolic privileges: the right to hunt; the right to own a dovecot; the right to carry weapons; the right to the first pew in church. But the package of burdens varied enormously not only from state to state but region to region and even village to village, as did their implementation (Sutherland 2002). Nor do we know for certain who gained and who lost from emancipation. One may have one's suspicions but in practice it can be quite hard to identify, for example, the beneficiaries of the privatisation of common land. And although we do know that agricultural production increased over the course of the 19th century, whether that was as a consequence of emancipation or of other developments associated with 'modernisation' – such as new crops, new technologies, roads, railways, market integration, capitalist farming – is not clear.

Given these doubts, one might imagine that peasant emancipation is a hotly debated topic among historians, but this is far from the case. With the exception of the 1861 Russian decree, no European example has attracted anything like the scholarly interest generated by the abolition of slavery in the new world. The latter is usually treated as an entirely separate topic, even though for contemporaries peasant and slave emancipation were linked events (Mintz 1996). The reasons for this neglect are varied but one explanation is the air of inevitability that hangs over the process – personal service was bound to give way to the cash nexus because that is what the modern world demands. Following the same teleology, peasants themselves were doomed to disappear before the forces of globalisation, industrial production and mass culture: they are a residual population, quaint but insignificant. Attention more deservedly settles on those social groups who embody the future, the middle classes or the urban workers, depending on one's point of view. Finally, at least in France which will be the focus of the rest of this chapter, many historians assume that feudalism was, by the time of the Revolution, a dead letter whose disappearance no one noticed. The current consensus among historians is that the French Revolution was an urban and intellectual undertaking fought out among competing elites. It has been characterized as “a largely irrelevant affair to the vast majority of rural inhabitants” who were either indifferent to events in Paris, or hostile to them (Woell 2008).

This view is demonstrable nonsense: peasants were active participants in the Revolution. The reason that such an interpretation has found traction among historians is best explained by the lack of sources concerning peasant attitudes and beliefs. Without these, their documented actions are difficult to interpret. Peasants seldom had much to say, or at least not in a form that is readily comprehensible. Historians need written sources but peasants were mostly illiterate, and if literate did not usually write things down. Theirs was primarily an oral culture, and it is very difficult to access past conversations, especially the conversations of the subordinate who were practiced in disguising statements that might get them into trouble. Mostly undocumented, even when their words were recorded, as in court for example, it can be difficult to extract a clear meaning from them.

For this reason the role that peasants themselves played in the processes of emancipation can easily be misunderstood, ignored or overlooked, allowing ‘top-down’ models of political action to go unchallenged. However, we can be fairly certain that feudalism was not irrelevant to peasants, because they remembered it and this powerful memory of exactions and the manner of their ending continued to affect their behaviour for decades to come. This rumbling antagonism was no doubt fostered by the legal hangovers of

the feudal regime, which peasant communities continued to challenge both in the courts and on the ground through vandalism, arson and other “small arms fire in the class war” (Scott 1985: 1, Agulhon 1982, Blaufarb 2012). But in addition to these traditional actions, politics also came to the peasantry in the course of the 19th century. Emancipation was followed, though not always immediately, by some form of political engagement, if not the franchise then at least some token of citizenship such as participation in village councils. Some kind of village assembly had often played a part in peasant life before emancipation, but now these were drawn into the national administrative structure, under the oversight of state bureaucrats. Peasants became subject to political campaigns and governments fretted about how they might cast their vote. This happened particularly early in France where, leaving out the complicated history of voting under the Revolution and First Empire (1789–1815), male suffrage arrived with the Revolution of 1848. Thereafter peasants were scrutinised as they came up to place their ballot. And a primary motive in those choices, according to these outside observers, was hostility to feudalism and those who had benefitted from it. This is recurrent theme in the observations of justices, prefects, sub-prefects and teachers as they tried to explain what, to the modern eye, seemed peculiar manifestations of peasant politics. For instance, the assault by several hundred people on the church of Chevanceaux (Charente-Inférieure) in April 1868 was triggered by the gift by the local noble landowner of a stained-glass window containing his coat of arms, interpreted as a sign that a return to feudalism was imminent (Soboul 1968: 979). According to prefects and other observers of rural elections, nothing was more powerful in mobilising the peasant vote than a (deliberately fostered) rumour that the lords, temporal and ecclesiastical, were about to return (Corbin 1992: 4). “How many peasants threaten you still with the Convention [the revolutionary regime associated with the Terror and the guillotining of aristocrats]? How many believe in the privileged and tremble at the mention of the tithe?” wrote a rural schoolteacher in the Nièvre as late as 1861 (Price 2004: 221).

At the time some commentators argued that these memories were not ‘traditional’ but fostered within the feverish electoral climate of the period, as noted by the English artist Philip Hamerton resident in France during the Second Empire and first decade of the Third Republic:

One of the strongest reasons for the increasing Republicanism of the peasantry is their recent belief that if Henri V came to the throne he would re-establish the old *corvées* – a very erroneous notion, of course, like all the ideas which suddenly gain currency in the uncultivated world, but it has served the Republic well. A Royalist told me that he believed this idea had

been industriously spread amongst the peasants by the Republican propaganda. Very likely the Republicans may have done their best to propagate it, and yet all such efforts would be utterly useless if there were not a tide of peasant-rumour and peasant-opinion to circulate the idea, a tide which no art, craft, wisdom, or knowledge of the instructed classes can either foresee or direct, and against which even the prodigiously strong and minutely perfect organization of the Church of Rome is utterly unable to contend. (Hamerton 1877: 228)

In other words according to Philip Hamerton there existed a set of peasant memories of the *ancien régime* which party propaganda could feed off, but not confect. We may surmise that these rumours, these memories, also explain a key feature of the 19th century – the problem of peasants’ “non-disappearance”, as Teodor Shanin (1990: 61) put it. Despite the hopes and expectations of both political Left and Right, both Karl Marx and state-sponsored agronomists, the peasantry did not break down into classes of rural capital and rural labour over the course of the century. In France, and for that matter other countries such as Germany, peasants appeared to be thriving right up to the First World War. They were not declining numerically, their percentage share of the national landholding was increasing, and their political clout was growing through their enrolment in cooperatives and land leagues in the 1880s and after. In order to explain this “non-disappearance” we must assume that peasants had some sense of themselves, some notion of their unity as a social group, some common commitment or some common enmity expressed in culture. It seems plausible that the memory of feudalism and subordination, continuing resentment against historical injustices and a renewable hostility to those who had lorded over their forebears, fed this peasant identity.

Historians of rural society, such as Albert Soboul, Alain Corbin, Peter Jones, Roger Price and Eugen Weber, have followed contemporaries in stressing the importance of peasant “myths” – to use Price’s word (2004: 221) – or “atavisms” – to use Jones’s (1985: 105) – concerning feudalism to explain peasant political behaviour in the 19th century. What form did these memories (or myths, or atavisms) take? How were they transmitted from generation to generation and, in as much as they shaped a collective peasant identity, from region to region? Are we talking about a common set of narratives shared over a wide area, or a plethora of purely local narratives? Did they concentrate only on the suffering with no reflection on how that had, or might, come to an end? By-and-large historians are not able to answer these questions: they observe behaviour and offer a rationale for it, but their habitual sources have little to say about the actual form and content of such memories. Therefore we need to turn to material more familiar to folklorists, such as legends. Legends such as this one, recorded in 1903 by the folklorist Félix Arnaudin from a rural woman, Anne-Jeanne

Mariolan (1822–1916, known as Marianne de Mariolan), then 81, from the Landes region south of Bordeaux. It is about a place, a supernatural place, and so falls squarely within the remit of this book.

They say that once upon a time at Lué there was a wicked lord, really hard on poor people. This lord was owner of much territory, woods and moors, but he had forbidden the shepherds and goatherds to pasture their animals on his property, or even to pass over it.

One morning he went to see a plantation of pines that he'd had put in, not far from Hidéou, and there he found a goatherd leading his flock. When the goatherd saw the lord, he tried to round up his goats, but the lord, mad with rage, went at him on his horse, and so both goatherd and goats started to run. The lord made his horse gallop right on the man's heels. The unfortunate man quickly begged for mercy.

'Pity, monseigneur, forgive me for the love of God.'

But the lord paid no attention to the goatherd's words. 'You would come back here you brigand', he kept repeating, 'You would come back to ravage my saplings?'

And this went on for quarter of a league. He forced the unfortunate goatherd before him, trotting on his horse. At last the goatherd was overcome with anger. He took his gun and, without a word, he fired it at the seigneur and left him for dead.

Then the man, seized with fear, fled and never came back to the parish. No one mourned the wicked lord and since then the poor people of Lué have been free to lead their herds wherever they felt like on the moors.

At the place where the wicked seigneur died, as no one had given him justice, the broom would not regrow, and the sand has remained red with his blood. (Arnaudin 1994: 294–295)

This story is not without its ironies, as Will Pooley has demonstrated in his discussion of this text (2014: 133–155); peasant emancipation is a tale well suited to the ironic mode. But what should we call this text – a legend, a peasant 'myth', the articulation of a 'peasant atavism'? We might simply call this peasant history, because in essence this is a true story. On 10 June 1760 Bernard de Pic de Blaise de la Mirandole was found dead on the path between the farm of Gouaillard and the church of Lué. Arnaudin had been familiar with legends of 'moussu Pic' from other storytellers around his home town of Labouheyre long before he recorded this version, and had already turned to the historical archive to learn more about the events that lay behind them. These other legends included such piquant details as the fact that the rumour was already abroad that the lord had killed a goatherd when the return of his mount, the saddle covered in blood, reversed the expectation (Arnaudin 2003 [1872]: 519–531).

Arnaudin found that the archival documents from 1760 reveal only the barest facts about the murder. They tell us nothing about how, why or by whom it was committed, because this information was not known to the authorities. This legend is, therefore, peasant history in the sense that it reveals knowledge of past events only known within the peasant community, but about which that community kept silent at the time. It is peasant history in

another sense too, it is indicative of how seigneurialism, at least at this place and this time, was experienced, and how peasants responded to it. History is of course not just the recording of ‘facts’ but also endows those facts with significance. So again this is peasant history because it offers not only an account of events but also offers an interpretation of them: as a consequence of this event “the poor people of Lué have been free to lead their herds wherever they felt like”. That mattered at the time, and it continued to matter in Marianne de Mariolan’s time, for history is always present-facing even as it recounts the past.

The most striking feature of this story is that it offers a very different answer to the question posed at the start of this article, “who emancipated the peasantry?” According to Marianne de Mariolan, as far as the peasants of Labouheyre were concerned they did it themselves (the anonymity of the perpetrator serves to make him representative of the community as a whole). This was not emancipation from above but literally from below, the mounted lord struck down by the foot-soldier of the commons.

Some of my historian colleagues might object to calling this text a ‘history’. It displays several faults by the standards historians claim for themselves. For example, it collapses what was, in fact, a drawn out process (the assertion of communal control over the moors) into a single event. The interpretation of the consequences is disputable, with no room for the actions of the village council, the local administration, or the national government in settling ownership of the commons. This is particularly striking because, during Marianne’s lifetime, the Lande had experienced a new, and far more drastic form of enclosure. Under government pressure the communes had sold their land to private landlords, who like ‘moussu Pic’ had turned off the sheep and goats and planted maritime pines instead. The region was rapidly transformed into the largest man-made forest in Europe (Temple 2009). As the effective head of the Mariolan clan, Marianne was one of the agents of this process. The seeming identification with the ‘poor people’ of the region masks the transformation of the Mariolan family from peasant pastoralists into arboricultural capitalists. It is, in fact, not at all unusual for the richer and more successful members of rural communities to be the most articulate spokespeople for a peasant collective identity. They have the most to gain from denying the existence of ‘us’ and ‘them’, only a ‘we’ (Hopkin 2012: 185–209). This suggests that Marianne’s narration was strategic, aimed at influencing her contemporary audience, and was not a neutral retelling of ‘facts’.

However, all these criticisms might be addressed with equal validity to work of professional historians. For example, the potted history of peasant emancipation given above includes numerous examples of single events being offered as tokens of long and complex

processes (emancipation almost never occurred as a result of one decree, but was drawn out over decades); facts were advanced on the literate equivalent of hearsay (I know almost nothing about emancipation in Savoy and am reliant entirely on what Jerome Blum asserts to have been the case); and interpretations proffered even though I knew these to be vexed questions. Was Napoleon really the agent of modernisation in Germany? Many historians doubt this (Blanning 1989). And all histories are written for contemporary audiences with the intention of shaping their beliefs about the past and therefore directing their actions in the present, that is not a phenomenon unique to oral culture. Even Marie's indication of a supernatural agency at work, marking the spot where murder went unavenged, is not so unfamiliar to historians: in the 19th century it was not unusual for historians to see the hand of providence at work, before replacing it with other *dei ex machina* such as national integration, class consciousness, political culture, and so on. The distinction between peasant oral legend and academic history is not so great.

19th-century folklore collections may, therefore, contain the materials for an alternative history, a more 'democratic history' of feudalism and emancipation in which the peasants were not just waiting on state action but were agents with some control over their lives. This history need not necessarily contradict those "constituted in the hegemonic centres of knowledge", but at the very least they might operate as a corrective to them (Beiner 2004: 217). Emancipation may have come from above but perhaps it was presaged by movements from below (as Tsar Alexander II warned his nobles in 1857) (Leonard 2011: 31). On the night of 4 August 1789 the deputies in the French National Assembly were undoubtedly moved by an exalted spirit of patriotic self-sacrifice, but their theatrical gestures were played out against a backdrop of widespread rural revolt (more violent and threatening in the Parisian rumour mill than it was in reality). It is easier to renounce privileges that have, for practical purposes, already gone up in flames (Markoff 1996: 427–450). And as this example demonstrates, what matters in directing one's actions is not the truth but what one believes to be true. Therefore, it is significant that Marianne de Mariolan believed that emancipation came from below, and attempted to convince others of this 'truth', even if a more sceptical historian might cast doubt on her version.

I must admit that I'm not the first to call for a legendary history of France. The Revolution itself forced French historians to reconsider the nature of their available sources and find them wanting. It is worth revisiting their efforts within the framework of Nordic, Baltic and Celtic research on legends, because it stakes a claim to a 'Celtic' character for the whole of France. Although few people outside the hexagon would consider France (with the

exception of the Breton peninsula) a Celtic country, at certain periods at least numerous French people have considered themselves the descendants of Celts.

This ‘Celtic’ element in French national identity can easily be overlooked as it is seldom foregrounded, compared with France’s revolutionary or even royal heritage. Indeed the most common contemporary reference to *nos ancêtres les Gaulois* (‘our ancestors the Gauls’) is as a post-colonial joke, the mythic first sentence of the primary school textbook taught to all children of whatever race throughout the French empire (Gross 2005). Nonetheless, in the 19th century, one regularly finds passing references to some sort of Celtic identity, especially among working-class and peasant autobiographers, and among folklorists. The migrant stonemason and Republican politician Martin Nadaud, for example, opened his autobiography with the claim that his family belonged to “the great and powerful Gallic race”. Although reduced to slavery by the Romans and the Franks, the Gauls “always wanted the Republic” he maintained (Nadaud 2011 [1895]: 38–39). The fact that these references were so commonplace, so uncritically accepted, reveals something about the shared presumptions about history and culture at the time. It is ironic that, in a post-colonial context, “our ancestors the Gauls” has come to represent the cultural power of the metropole, because in France itself it carried the assertion of a plebeian (and insurgent) social identity. Gauls are the ‘the people’, the peasantry, the salt of the earth. Hence Gauloises were ‘democratic’ cigarettes, preferred by footsoldiers in the trenches in First World War and resistance fighters in the Second. This social identity requires another against which it is defined – the seigneur, the lord – who is both socially and ethnically excluded from the people, and therefore the nation (Weber 1991, Viallaneix & Ehrard 1982, Dietler 1994).

The rediscovery of the Celts and their take up in French popular culture arose from questions about the nature of the tripartite social and political division of France before the Revolution. As in other countries, the population was divided into three estates – the lords spiritual (the first estate, the clergy), the lords temporal (the second estate, the nobility), and the commons (the third estate). From the 16th century onwards, perhaps because the system was breaking down as a practical means of administration, scholarly attention was directed to the origins of this arrangement. Who were the Second Estate, and how did they come to have dominion over the Third? One answer, promoted by nobles themselves, was that their privileges were justified by right of conquest. They were the descendants of the Franks, the Germanic tribe that had conquered the Romano-Celtic population of Gaul and continued to hold them in subjugation. The foremost proponent of this theory was Henry de Boulainvilliers (1658–1722), an unashamed apologist for feudalism. With the Revolution,

however, while this entire political and social order tottered, the logic of conquest could be reversed. As abbé Sieyès put it in his enormously influential revolutionary pamphlet “What is the Third Estate?” the descendants of the Gauls and Romans, the Third Estate, “could again be noble by conquering in turn” (Sieyès 2002 [1788]: 11).

The French Revolution of 1789 was widely interpreted by those who lived through it as the revolt of the Third Estate against the two privileged orders. In contemporary imagery the Third Estate was always portrayed as a peasant, and even though many of its most active partisans were lawyers, administrators and so on, it was understood that peasants made up the bulk of Third Estate in the present, and peasants were the forebears of all its members (Vovelle 1991). If the Second Estate were the descendants of invading Franks “and other savages out of the forests and marshes of ancient Germany” (as Sieyès put it, 2002 [1788]: 9), then this revolt was not just against the tyranny of a privileged class, but also against an ethnic other, a foreigner. And if feudalism was not a functional (albeit hierarchical) system of exchange but rather the legacy of illegal violence, it was easier to justify its abolition.

These radical political possibilities, nourished by a current of *Ossian*-inspired romanticism, encouraged an outburst of *Celtomanie* in the Revolutionary decade. On the whole this had more to do with philology and archaeology than with racial war, although the latter was occasionally revived, for example when the French wanted to make common cause with insular Celts against their oppressors, the English. The inheritor of the Revolution’s mantle, Napoleon, would give some encouragement to an imperial Celtic identity through the foundation of the Académie Celtique in 1804. The Academy’s aim was twofold – first to study Celtic languages both as they existed, and as they had once existed, in France; second “to collect, compare and explain all the monuments, usages, traditions... and to explain ancient times through modern times” (Belmont 1995: 33, cf. Ozouf 1984, Senn 1981). It was less devoted to the reconstruction of the pre-Roman past than tracing the continuity of France’s Celtic heritage into the present: in other words, they sought ‘survivals in culture’ in the form of peasants’ legends. Although the Academy did not outlast the regime it served (its last publication appeared in 1813), it is often cited as the origins of folklore studies in France, and, thanks to its influence on one member, Jacob Grimm, not without significance in the development of folklore studies elsewhere too (Gaidoz 1904: 140–142).

I do not want to exaggerate: the narrative of Celt versus Frank was not a particularly common or powerful one during the Revolutionary period. And it was complicated by the fact that the most obviously Celtic element in the French population, the Bretons, were also among the least enthusiastic revolutionaries. Some Celtomanes, such as Jacques Cambry,

would develop theories of racial degeneration to account for exactly this paradox (Bianchi 2008). Nor, is it a particularly accurate narrative. However, my point is that the emergence of ‘the people’ as a political entity in France, as a sovereign nation, was accompanied by a story that was not dissimilar to that which would be told in other European nations *in statu nascendi* over the course of the 19th-century – Ireland, the Czech lands, Serbia, Estonia – that the emancipation of labour was a necessary precursor to the political emancipation of ‘the people’, and both could only be achieved by the defeat of a feudal oppressor who was simultaneously an ethnic other.

A problem facing the revolutionary generation was that this newly emancipated people was without its own culture or its own history. Its language was that of one invader, the Romans; its history that of another, the Franks, starting with the first king of France, Clovis 1 (466–511). France’s Celtic history and culture might provide the glue that would unite the Empire, particularly as it spread to those areas outside the borders of France which shared a similar Celtic pre-Roman history (the low countries, Switzerland, northern Italy, Spain...). The attempts of the Académie Celtique to collect legends connected to supposed Celtic monuments might be understood in this light. Legends would provide an oral history of an oppressed people, and the history of their resistance to their oppressors. This would become the foundation charter for the new Empire. The project went to pieces on the rocks of its members’ linguistic ignorance and their erroneous ideas about the pre-Roman past, not to mention the indifference of much of the educated public, for whom culture was by definition classical. Nonetheless, even in the Revolution, some people understood that oral traditions could provide an alternative history.

Their vision was taken up by romantic historians during the Restoration (1814–1848), most notably by Jules Michelet, a keen reader of Giovanni Battista Vico, Johann Gottfried Herder and the Grimms (Rearick 1974: 82–102). His aim was to use legends to write “an alternative history, that is the history of the soul of the people, and of its imagination” (Michelet 1889 [1847]: II, 5). ‘The people’ is a useful term because it is both socially divisive – the Second Estate, the nobility, cannot belong to ‘the people’, at least as long as they retain their separate identity – but at the same time it is a politically unifying terminology, ‘the people’ are synonymous with ‘the nation’, obfuscating other social distinctions. The introduction to the second volume of his history of the French Revolution, published in 1847, opens with an impassioned defence of the oral tradition as a reliable source for the historian (and a rejection of the historicist school emerging in Berlin around Leopold von Ranke, which attached value only to documented facts, that is to the written archive).

When I say ‘oral tradition’ I mean national tradition, that which... everyone says and repeats, ... that which you can learn if you spend the evening in the village bar; that which you can collect if, on your way you meet a traveller, and you start to talk about the weather, and then the expense of foodstuffs, and then of the Emperor’s time, and then of the time of the Revolution... Note well his judgements: about events he can sometimes be wrong... But about men he is never mistaken, and only rarely misled. (Michelet 1889 [1847]: II, 6)

Michelet was arguing that villagers not only possessed an alternative history, but also an alternative historiography, that is an alternative method to make sense of the past, and to distinguish the meaning of history from ‘mere events’.

Michelet uses the word “collect”, but this is something that Michelet himself did not do. Nonetheless he did inspire others, most notably the novelist George Sand, whose book, *Légendes rustiques* (published in 1858) is one of the first works in French literature to claim to be taken direct from peasant oral tradition. Sand went to her native Berry with the intention of supplying Michelet’s demand for a “great legend-trove of France”. In the preface she wrote “the fantastic world which enflames or stupefies the mind of the peasant is an unpublished story of times past... The peasant is the sole historian, so to speak, of pre-historic times.” However, later in the same document she lamented that he fulfilled this role rather badly, and “no historical tradition has remained in peasants’ memory”. (Sand 2000 [1858]: 18, 64)

The person who came closest to actually supplying Michelet’s ‘legend-trove’ was Paul Sébillot who, like Sand and Michelet, was also a Republican activist. Sébillot was the leading French folklorist of the late 19th century. He was responsible for dozens of collections of folktales, he founded the *Société des traditions populaires*, and he edited its journal the *Revue des traditions populaires* (Postic 2011). He was in direct contact with most regional folklorists, including Félix Arnaud, and helped publish their work. He was also the person who did most for ‘legend studies’ in France. In 1897 Sébillot used his position as editor to urge his readers to seek out what would henceforward be identified in the index of that journal as ‘Little Local Legends’, short narratives (sometimes no more than a sentence) that related some apparently historic (even if supernatural) fact (Sébillot 1897: 129–131). The response to this request was huge, and within a decade the journal was already publishing its 1000th ‘petite légende locale’. Sébillot would use this material to construct his multi-volume encyclopaedia of *The Folklore of France* in 1904, and in particular to write those books (IX–X–XI) that took as their subject the legendary history of France. Like George Sand before

him, Sébillot was disappointed that “peasants conserve a very small number of historical memories” (Sébillot 1882: I, 345). In particular, he found that legends did not supply the ‘democratic history’ – the history of the people by the people for the people – that Michelet had expected. Instead he noted “the people [meaning the popular classes] appear fairly often in historical legends, but only in a secondary capacity, as they orbit those who held religious and feudal power” (Sébillot 2002 [1904–1906]: 1341).

Disappointment with the peasant *qua* historian is a recurrent discourse in 19th-century folkloristics. However, as we have seen, this lament contradicts those observers of peasant political action who argued that peasants retained a vivid memory, too vivid even, of their forebears’ lives under feudalism. It is not difficult to resolve this contradiction. Although Michelet used the term “alternative history” (*autre histoire*) to describe legends, the grand lines of his chronology and his concerns had been established by literary history, that is the history of the monarchy. He was not yet prepared to accept that peasant historians might have a different set of priorities, one which relegated national conflict behind social conflict. For Republicans like Sébillot, Sand and Michelet, social conflict undermined the unity of the people. What Michelet was looking for in legends was an explicitly national epic concerning great men, great events... the clash of Celt and Teuton, the reverberations of Alesia, stories in which a people united to make their own history. But what folklorists like Sand and Sébillot found when they interrogated peasants was local, short, minor, unheroic – narratives of oppression and defeat as often as inspiring tales of resistance and victory. In as much as they did find the latter these often related the counter-revolutionary resistance of peasants to the Republic – ‘the people’ opposed to the very regime that acted in their name (Cadic 2003 [1908–1918], Lagrée & Roche 1993)!

The importance of the social is apparent in Sébillot’s finding that historical legends revolved around those who held religious or feudal power. Another of his findings helps us to understand that legends, rather than epic, were strategic. Considering legends about war Sébillot wrote that many belonged to “what one might call the folkloric commonplaces [*lieux communs*] of battles, because one finds them at the same time in narratives from elsewhere and from antiquity” (Sébillot 2002 [1904–1906]: 1406). These commonplaces were narrative schemas which storytellers applied to events, personages and locations distant from each other in space and time. Folklorists might call these ‘migratory legends’. The fact that very similar stories were told about distinct events further damaged the reputation of the peasant historian, because it undermined his claim to factual accuracy. However, more recently oral historians, observing a similar phenomenon, have proved more tolerant, and have learnt to

use such narratives to explore collective concerns (Ó Ciosáin 2004: 224–225). Legends made sense of experience rather than simply recording it; in the process of endowing events with significance, storytellers drew on the existing body of collective knowledge or tradition. In other words Michelet was right, legends were an expression of a popular, collective imagination; they were both part of, and give shape to, a group ideology. Of course that is true of other genres of oral literature, but perhaps more so with legends because legend carries some kind of ‘truth value’, and therefore is “intimately related to cultural ideology – the norms, values and expectations of a particular cultural group” (Tangherlini 2007: 8).

This ideological dimension is another reason why historians cannot ignore legends: they help us to understand why people behaved as they did. One might argue that legends, despite their historical character, are not really about the past, they are about the present and future. They discuss the kinds of conflicts that have arisen in the past precisely because these same kinds of conflicts are likely to arise again, and at the same time they suggest strategies for surviving these conflicts. The performance of a legend like Marianne de Mariolan’s was (and here again I follow Timothy Tangherlini’s exposition of the significance of legends) a deeply political act: she was attempting not only to shape the audience’s conception of the past, but by so doing influence their actions in the future, by highlighting particular social solidarities and social divisions. What one believes to be true directly affects the way one behaves. Therefore, those who share, or come to share through legend telling, a particular vision of the past can, as Michelet both believed and hoped, be mobilised for collective action in the present.

I cite as an example Louise Michel – anarchist, revolutionary, the ‘Red Virgin’ of the Paris Commune, and folklorist (during her seven years of transportation to New Caledonia she collected the material for a volume of *Legends and Heroic Songs of the Kanak People* [1885]). After her return to France, but during another period of imprisonment, she wrote her memoirs (Michel 1886), which are a paean to the oral tradition. Michel was the illegitimate daughter of a servant and the son of the local landowning family (the former seigneurs). Although she grew up in the manor house of Vroncourt (Haute-Marne), she went to the village spinning-bees (*écregnes* in the local patois) and participated in village oral culture. Her sense of her Celtic inheritance, and the value she attached to oral culture, undoubtedly owe much to her readings in Michelet, among others, but she also drew on the tales told to her by her peasant neighbours and mentors (Hart 2001–2002). Their stories turned her into a rebel: “From my evenings at the village spinning-bees date a sentiment of revolt that I have often rediscovered.” The story she then goes on to relate concerns not a feudal lord but a

grain-hoarder (though the two were often the same) who so starved the family of the storyteller that two of her children died. And the moral that narrator and listener drew from the narrative was very different: the former was not moved to revolt but rather to accept the will of God. (Michel 1886: 226–228) However, it is in the nature of a legend that its significance will change with the context in which it is told. The same story can, with a different twist, require resignation or indignation from its audience (Gilsenan 1996: 115–139).

Historians have used the term ‘atavism’ to describe this peasant recitation of wrongs suffered at the hands of feudal (and other) oppressors. Atavism is usually a pejorative word: it implies that peasants were unthinking primitives in thrall to irrational urges. However, for Michel, atavism had a positive meaning; it was what gave the people, individually and collectively, their identity: “I spoke of atavism. Back there [in Vroncourt], at the very foundations of my life, are these legendary narratives.” (Michel 1886: 39, 236) Although one feature of oral culture is its ability to forget what is no longer functional (‘structural amnesia’), another is redundancy. As one cannot always know what knowledge has become irrelevant, and as whatever is not repeated in an oral culture will be lost, it is not surprising that peasants continued to relate stories about feudal abuses long after feudalism itself had been abolished. However, given that the very definition of the peasant requires becoming “subject to the demands and sanctions of power-holders outside his social stratum” (Wolf 1966: 11), perhaps these stories had not yet become irrelevant. Feudalism in the Old Regime sense may have gone by the time of Louise Michel and Marianne de Mariolan, but it left profound traces in the social relations of the 19th century countryside. If seigneurs were extinct, landlords remained, if feudal tutelage was abolished, clientage and caciquismo might replace it. Legends of the past could still provide useful lessons in the present and future. All atavism means in this context is that peasant actions were conditioned by their sense of history, and that does not seem nearly so unreflective, or so unreasonable. What is the point of history if it doesn’t offer some kind of reflection on the present?

This chapter is really an advertisement for a research project not yet undertaken. My hypothesis is that, in folklore archives lies the material to write an alternative history of feudalism and its destruction, a history told from the peasants’ point of view. I do not claim that this alternative history would be more accurate than that preserved in the written record, but we need not assume that it would be more inaccurate either. And whatever its inaccuracies, because it would tell us what peasants believed to be true, it would help us understand their attitudes and behaviour subsequent to emancipation. As an initial foray, let

us consider the series of ‘Little Local Legends’, which appeared in the *Revue des Traditions Populaires* between 1897 and the journal’s closure in 1919, and which helped Paul Sébillot formulate his ideas on the subject: what does this sample have to offer in the way of legends of feudalism? The recurrent themes found there might begin to give some substance to this wished-for peasant history.

The legends came from many sources. Both through the journal and his own private correspondence Sébillot had built up a substantial network of contributors in the provinces who sent him texts for this collection. The latter included Félix Arnaudin; indeed his summary version of the legend of the murder of Lord of Lué had appeared under the ‘Little Local Legends’ rubric in 1899 (LLL 345). Both Sébillot and these correspondents participated in France’s web of regional learned societies. Although such societies covered many subjects from agriculture to zoology, local archaeology and antiquarian pursuits formed a central part of their activity. Some organised competitions for the best folkloric texts and many visited monuments to gather first-hand information on their legendary history. Sébillot often reported their findings. Regional learned societies also drew on the ‘village monographs’ which the French minister of education had directed village teachers to complete in every commune across the country as part of the preparations for the International Expositions held in Paris in 1889 and 1900. The instructions specifically mentioned local legends and oral histories. Teachers responded with different degrees of enthusiasm to this request: some ignored it, some denied that there were any local legends, but some provided numerous texts. A few of these monographs were published independently and Sébillot also drew on these; however most remain unpublished in departmental archives and are an underused folkloric source. In addition, the late 19th century witnessed the beginnings of popular tourism (in its original sense of leisure touring) in France – by train, by bicycle and by car. National touring clubs were set up to advise on itineraries and local tourism offices publicised the sites to see in their vicinity. Both spawned an ever greater profusion of guidebooks which frequently made mention of local legends attached to a ruin or a church which they considered worth a visit. These too were used by Sébillot.

The collection ‘little local legends’ is, therefore, not only a valuable source in itself, it also points to an even denser profusion of texts. However, these are often legends shorn of any contextual information and reduced to their most anecdotic and picturesque form. Yet even in this truncated state, they confirm that the crimes of feudal lords were a common topic of popular storytelling.

They say at Coadout [Côtes d'Armor] that the seigneur of Bois-de-la-Roche returns to his castle every night. His unquiet soul groans from the top of the narrow granite staircase and one hears the dull thud of his pickaxe as he tries to unearth his buried treasure. (LLL 47)

Dozens of castles were believed to be the site of hoarded treasure still jealously guarded by phantom seigneurs. The source of this wealth is seldom specified, but it does not take a great intuitive leap to interpret this legend as a peasant judgement on feudal extortionists. 'The manor-house of Goas-Hamon in Plouisy [Côtes d'Armor] was destroyed by lightning one Sunday during mass as punishment, so the legend goes, for the impiety of its inhabitants who preferred to play cards than go to church' (LLL 48). Seigneurial impiety was the frequent wellspring of legend. Sabbath hunters were condemned to eternally hunt through night skies, as happened to the count de Valory (from Saint-Ellier, Maine-et-Loire; LLL 295). The local origin story attached to the Wild Hunt often drew on some such legend. Hunting, as a seigneurial privilege and as the cause of material damage to crops, was particularly resented. 'The baroness of Montfort [Côte-d'Or] who, when alive, imprisoned all those who did not acknowledge her as she deemed appropriate, still wanders in the form of a wolf that one cannot kill' (LLL 68). Other chatelaines bathed in the blood of maidens, ate babies (LLL 166) or threw children to their dogs (LLL 408). Seigneurs devised horrible punishments for their adulterous wives, rolling them in a barrel studded with nails (LLL 38), strangling (LLL 171), using their skin to make a chair (LLL 307).

Some legends concern charitable seigneurs, though their stories make little mention of their good works but rather concentrate on their conversion. According to Breton legends both Pierre Le Gouvello de Keriolet (1602–1660) and Marot de la Garaye (1675–1755) led dissolute lives until a ghostly warning of the hellfire that awaited them brought about a change of heart (Sébillot 1898: 159–162). Local memory needed to account for why these seigneurs, whose reputations are attested in written history too, were so different from their fellows.

As Sébillot noted, the focus in legends was on brutal and avaricious lords, not on the peasants who had to suffer them. Punishment in most cases was not human but divine. However, we do find some indications of peasant resistance. In the same year that the journal carried Arnaudin's account of the death of the seigneur de Lué, two other legends were published about the murder of seigneurs. In the first, the seigneur of Bosfranchet (Puy-de-Dôme) had ordered that no one should observe his daughter's cortège on the day of her marriage. Unfortunately the charcoal-burner's son, overcome by a desire to see this fabled beauty, was caught and hung. To revenge himself the charcoal-burner kidnapped the

seigneur's son, brought him up as a brigand, and finally urged him on to kill his father (LLL 297). In the second, the tyrannical seigneur of Moncoutant (Deux-Sèvres) was shot through his window while dozing, 'and this was how his people found him the next day, already cold and his heart transfixed by peasant lead' (LLL 362). I have not been able to ascertain whether either story has, as did that of Blaise de la Pic de la Mirandole, a basis in fact.

There are a lot of questions one might ask of this kind of folkloric source. Who told stories about the feudal past, to whom, when and where? Was the burden of feudalism a more frequent topic in some regions than others? How does that map onto the political choices of peasant voters? What role did external agents, such as urban politicians, play in fostering the memory of feudalism? How did peasants compare the past and the present? What shifts in social, economic, legal and cultural relations did they perceive? How did that history continue to influence peasant actions, not only in the countryside but as they migrated to the city and even overseas? Was the process of class formation among the urban migrants predicated on their historic knowledge of an earlier confrontation, that between peasant and lord?

I'm interested in peasant history, but I'm also interested in peasant historiography. What models did the peasant apply to understand events related to the past? What schema did they use to make them relevant to their own present? Certain narrative structures seem to have helped the peasant make sense of the experience of feudalism, and encode it in a usable form for another generation. Stories of haunted castles, baby-eating countesses and godless hunters were found across France, and beyond. One will find plenty of Sébillot's *lieux communs* among the legends about feudalism told across Europe, pointing to a shared social history that escapes national boundaries. It has been very interesting, in the short time I have been in Estonia, to observe the efforts being made to integrate Estonia's national history to the history of the European continent through the role of its Swedish kings or its enlightened Baltic German philosophers. Perhaps, however, it would be easier to make a common history through the epos, even in the ironic mode, of peasant emancipation.

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