Introduction

This book explores one of the great moments of transition in modern history – the French Revolution – through the lives and experiences of the inhabitants of six villages. It joins together the problem-oriented approach of the comparative historian and the craft skills of the micro-historian to produce an unusual, authentic and above all decentred analysis of the way a generation of French country dwellers responded to the pressures threatening to alter their lives fundamentally from the 1760s onwards. The reader will judge how far this project has been successful. The practice of comparative history is usually confined to large-scale social phenomena, and it is an open question whether a genre that might be described as 'comparative micro-history' can – or should – exist. The research for this book commenced under no particular theoretical or methodological banner. As anyone who has worked at the grass roots will testify, the availability or non-availability of source materials tends to overshadow all other considerations. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to give the impression that the book simply evolved in a random and haphazard manner. Three guiding ambitions served to direct and structure my investigations: a desire to improve the 'reach' of social history in an area that historians of France think they know rather well; a desire to transcend the ubiquitous village monograph; and finally a desire to try to avoid a composite or 'synthetic' history of the experiences of country dwellers in which examples are culled from far and wide in order to illustrate propositions that have usually been formulated in advance. Most history writing is synthetic in this sense, of course, and we could not manage without such accounts. However, its explanatory capacity – in the field of rural history particularly – is fairly modest and there comes a time when our knowledge and understanding of the past can only be enhanced by adopting alternative strategies.

The issue can be put quite simply: how are the limitations of traditional village monographs to be overcome whilst at the same time unlocking the potentially valuable information they contain? Long ago Albert Soboul

urged writers of single village histories to abandon description and adopt a problem-solving approach.[1] The continuing vigour of 'vie quotidienne' styles of history writing within France may indicate that most consumers do not want their history 'problematised'. Nevertheless, it is advice that this study takes to heart: the smaller the entity the bigger the questions that need to be asked. Big questions confined to small localities only make sense within a wider frame of reference, however, and so it became clear almost from the outset that my research presupposed a comparative approach. Comparison can be achieved in several different ways, though, and social historians tend to be too nervous about disturbing the unities of time and place to apply the methodology rigorously. Most commonly, they rely on juxtaposition in which the comparison is implicit and has to be inferred by the reader. Sometimes they blend together the 'synthetic' and the 'comparative' approaches in a manner disquieting to fellow investigators – sociologists and political scientists in particular.

As the subtitle of this study indicates, it is an attempt at rigorous comparison, in the sense that the book is structured around six village histories. Despite sore temptation on occasion, the evidence adduced and the arguments formulated derive almost entirely from these sources. It aspires to a degree of rigour unusual within the field of social and political history in another sense, too. Every effort is made to ensure that the case studies 'talk' to one another. Juxtaposition is usually adequate to the purpose of testing hypotheses or general propositions, but it will not ensure interaction between the subjects of study. By far the most interesting conclusions of my research emerged from the comparing and contrasting of individual village 'situations' – their institutional architecture, their economic characteristics, their elites, the hopes and fears of their ordinary inhabitants and so on. Near total reliance on case studies and a comparative mode of investigation creates its own problems, though. The reader is entitled to ask whether the case studies are representative. If not, why not? If not, how were they chosen and for what purpose? And if they were not selected for their typicality, how do they contribute to the general sum of historical understanding?

The answer to the first objection will help to provide answers to the others. The life histories of six groups of villagers cannot be expected to encapsulate the experiences of a whole generation of country dwellers who grew up during the *ancien régime* and grew old in the aftermath of the

[1] A. Soboul, 'Esquisse d'un plan de recherches pour une monographie de communauté rurale', *La Pensée*, July–August 1947, 34–48.

Revolution and the Napoleonic Empire. The case studies on which this book is based are not representative, therefore. Yet nor are they palpably unrepresentative. 'Que la France se nomme diversité,' Lucien Febvre was once moved to exclaim, and his remark can be taken as an implied reproof to would-be schematisers.[2] In a context of a little over 40,000 rural parishes at the end of the *ancien régime*, it would not have made very much difference had I studied sixteen, sixty or six hundred villages. The solutions most commonly espoused in order to address the dilemma of typicality are twofold: either the historian narrows his attention to a particular region, or he constructs a 'village typology'. Georges Lefebvre's *Les Paysans du Nord*, which is based on an investigation of 208 villages, is the classic example of the former approach,[3] whereas the latter has many exemplars. Yet neither 'solution' has been adopted in this case. Why not?

Regional rural histories are legion; indeed, it is by this route that most of our knowledge of the 'early modern' and the 'modern' French countryside has been adumbrated. True, regional histories that span the divide of 1789 are still quite rare,[4] but I have no wish to add to their number. Invaluable though the corpus of regional rural histories may be, it does not allow much scope for comparison and bears a close methodological resemblance to the 'synthetic' style of analysis that I am keen to avoid. The problem with the 'village typology' as an answer to the challenge of diversity is that it frequently becomes an exercise in self-deception. Two traps lie in wait for the unwary: the illusion of representivity and the illusion of objectivity. Constructing a balanced sample of French villages for the purpose of in-depth and cross-regional analysis is not an easy objective to achieve, as most rural historians would acknowledge. However, it is all too easy to construct a self-validating sample of village types which, upon analysis, turns out to vindicate the criteria employed in the initial choice. Even within the confines of a profession that makes no bones about its inability to achieve scientific levels of objectivity, this seems an unsound method. Yet practitioners of the typological approach constantly lay themselves open to the criticism of tautology.

My six villages constitute a selection rather than a sample, then. But how were they chosen? Whilst some care was taken to seek out cases for study in the major historic regions of *ancien-régime* France, it would be foolish to make any larger claim to representivity. They represent themselves, and,

[2] L. Febvre, 'Que la France se nomme diversité: à propos de quelques études jurassiennes', *Annales: économies, sociétés, civilisations*, 3 (July–September 1946), 271–4.
[3] G. Lefebvre, *Les Paysans du Nord pendant la Révolution française* ([condensed version] Bari, 1959).
[4] See, however, J.-P. Jessenne, *Pouvoir au village et révolution: Artois, 1760–1848* (Lille, 1987).

on the whole, I have refrained from treating them as 'tokens' except where overwhelming evidence came to light which indicated that they could usefully perform this role. From the outset the aim was to compare and contrast without too many preconceptions as to what would emerge from the exercise. In my mind I likened the six subjects to laboratory animals brought together for experimental purposes. While each would require prodding and poking in order to disclose individual characteristics under varying laboratory conditions, it was the interactions that I particularly wished to observe. When applied to suitable subject matter, the comparative method has a formidable potential to cut through the opacity that screens off rural history from all but the most persistent observers.

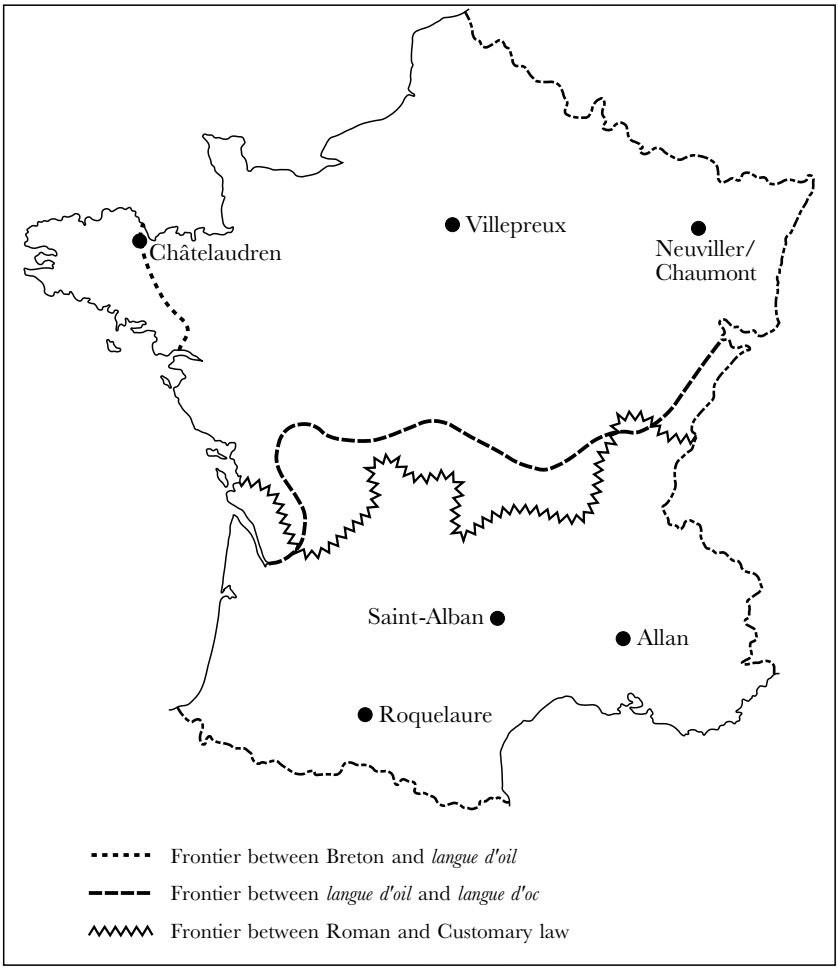
Can a small and 'unrepresentative' selection of country dwellers gathered together in a handful of villages serve as an adequate base for generalisation? The answer has to be negative, of course, even though one might doubt whether the conclusions of 'synthetic' history writing are any better rooted. Yet this does not amount to an admission that the study of villages contributes nothing to the general sum of historical understanding. Micro-historians rightly point out that the explanatory premium dangled in return for 'thinking big' has not lived up to expectations by and large; if the reach of social history is to be improved it might in fact be better to begin by 'thinking small'. As I hope my study will show, village history – properly conceived – restores the complexity to individual lives and the events enfolding those lives. Moreover, as a tool for reconstructing popular mentalities it is unsurpassed. Indeed, micro-historians such as Giovanni Levi make larger claims, professing to believe that in-depth analysis of small social formations will uncover the existence of a specific form of peasant rationality.[5] Comparative micro-history provides a swift antidote for such essentialist modes of thinking, however. On the evidence of the case studies I shall be examining, rationality is not a given but a commodity apprehended differently both within and between villages. The main contribution that the comparative study of the village can make to the sum total of historical knowledge lies not in the discovery of a deep stratum of social truth, then, but in a better understanding of the historic reasons for difference, and sameness.

All of these theoretical and methodological considerations must yield to the question of source availability, though. Village history requires source materials of exceptional quality, and a comparative village history demands sources of comparable quality replicated six times over. With more than 40,000 villages to choose from, one might suppose that the task of selecting

[5] G. Levi, *Inheriting Power: The Story of an Exorcist* (Chicago, 1988), p. xv.

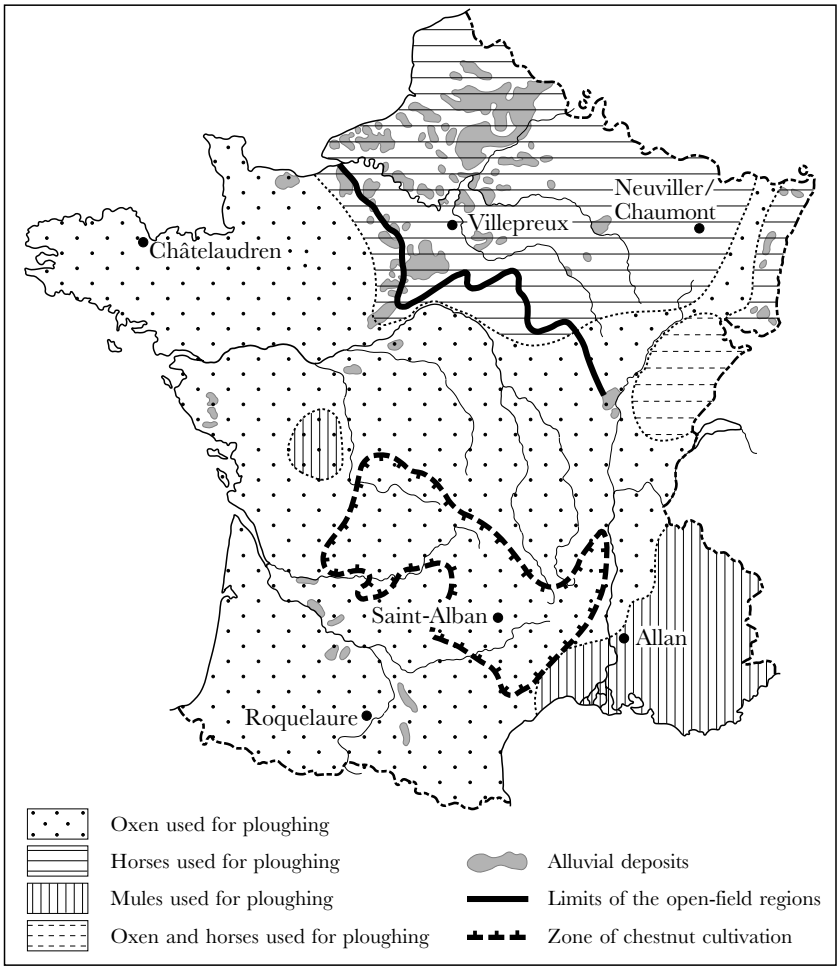
sites for study would be relatively straightforward, but, on the contrary, the fully documented French village is the stuff of historians' dreams. For the purposes of this study it was necessary to examine the credentials of around fifty small localities. Even so, the six villages (not to mention several hamlets) that were eventually retained for in-depth analysis proved to be of uneven quality, as will shortly become apparent. In the absence of any assurance that further searching in the archives would result in an improved selection, I decided that the satisfactory geographical distribution of my sites of study (see maps 1 and 2), together with their contrasting ecological and cultural characteristics, should count for more than the imperfections in the documentation. Nevertheless, it was disappointing to discover that one of the villages selected for analysis had lost its municipal *délibérations* – the prime source for this kind of study – relatively recently (see figure 1). Availability cannot be taken as tantamount to accessibility in any case. In four out of the six candidate villages it proved necessary to consult sources *in situ*, that is to say in communal archive depositories, and even in private homes.

Moreover, the question of sources cannot be tackled in isolation. For this book has a quite explicit frame of reference. As stated at the beginning, the aim is to identify and explore some of the processes that altered the habitual trajectory of country dwellers' lives across a span of six decades linking the *ancien régime* to the Restoration. If a rigorous comparison is to be sustained, it is therefore essential that the sources provide chronological continuity. A village whose pre-1789 (or post-1800) history remains shrouded in mystery for want of adequate documentation does not make a suitable candidate for comparative analysis. Yet it would be disingenuous to present the search for sources, or rather for adequately documented villages, as an entirely dispassionate exercise. The question 'sources for what purpose?' is bound to intrude at an early stage, and so it proved in this case. I did not set about gathering my material and thinking about what I might do with it as two completely separate operations. The availability (and non-availability) of sources has therefore helped to structure what follows, and so, too, have certain questions that I have brought to bear on the subject matter. But a constant, contextual interrogating of the sources to see what they might yield of relevance to the central problematic should not be confused with hypothesis formulation and testing, which is a rather different methodology of comparative history. Where *a priori* lines of enquiry proved unenlightening or inappropriate to the evidential context I have not hesitated to abandon them. Instead I have allowed questions suggested by the case studies themselves to order the agenda.



Map 1. Localisation of case-study villages

The result – of necessity – is a study that explores some themes but not others. For instance, I had expected to pursue an argument that would illuminate the substantial militarisation of civil society between 1792 and 1814, but my case studies proved to be reluctant witnesses on this subject and I abandoned the idea at an early stage. A problem of sources no doubt, but perhaps also a salutary reminder that 'thinking small' can offer correctives to grand narratives. On the other hand, I had not expected the theme of seigneurialism – or rather anti-seigneurialism – to bulk as



Map 2. The rural economy of France in the eighteenth century

large as it does. When villagers raise an issue time and time again it would be a churlish historian who refused to listen. Nevertheless, the point that this book is not a *total* history of the village between 1760 and 1820 bears repeating. Apart from anything else, the rigorously comparative approach that I have adopted precludes any such undertaking.

What questions are addressed in the pages that follow, then? After an initial presentation of the sites of study, the reader will find (in chapter 2) an extended discussion of the internal architecture and power structuring

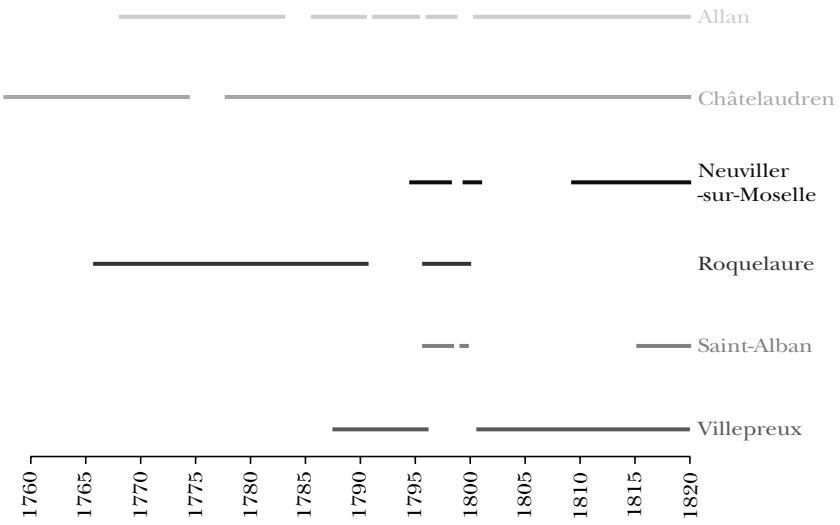


Figure 1. Extant civil deliberations of case-study villages (by year)

of *ancien-régime* villages which queries Alexis de Tocqueville's classic depiction of local institutions and social life etiolated by state centralisation. The awakening of village elites to the possibility of substantial institutional change and the rapid enlargement of social and political horizons within the space of just three or four years (1787–90) is the theme of chapter 3. 'What changes did villagers want to see happen?' and 'To what degree were they able to exert control over the pace and direction of change?' are the basic questions tackled at this stage. Chapter 4 explores how, and how far, villagers came to terms with the psychological landscape of citizenship that successive regimes sought to construct from 1789 onwards. Were the symbolic practices of the Revolutionary era absorbed internally? And what evidence can be marshalled to indicate that the transition from the old order to the new accomplished a durable transformation of collective identities? In view of the paucity of research devoted to the micro-politics of the village, chapter 5 occupies a key position in terms both of content and of method. By constant juxtaposition and comparison, it sets out to illuminate the way local power arenas functioned, and the way they evolved over time. Some of the vectors stimulating politicisation at the grass roots are identified, as are the different types of 'argument' going on at village level. Chapter 6 explores the spiritual dimension of village belief systems, before turning to examine the implications of changes in the relationship between the state and the church

for devotional habits and practices. It must be acknowledged that, in the near total absence of sources that might shed light on the religious convictions of villagers, the latter investigation makes more headway than the former. More precision is on offer in chapter 7, however, which assesses the repercussions of six decades of administrative interventionism on the rural economy. It pursues answers to questions arising out of the impact of libertarian and egalitarian ideologies in the realm of land use and ownership.

CHAPTER 1

Mise-en-scène

This study first encounters the village in the culminating decades of the *ancien régime*, a period of some thirty or forty years during which a totalising vision of administrative monarchy took hold of France. From the 1760s country dwellers in general and rural communities in particular became the focus of attention of reformers to a degree which historians have only recently begun to understand. While most of the reforms that were mooted received little more than piecemeal application, their reverberations would be far reaching. By 1789, when instructions were issued for parish assemblies to draw up *cahiers de doléances*, life in many, perhaps the majority of, French villages was already caught in a spiral of accelerating change. These changes – at once institutional, cultural and socio-economic – signal the direction in which it would be most profitable to press our enquiries.

At the most fundamental level we will need to ask whether Alexis de Tocqueville's argument that rural communities had become moribund by the end of the *ancien régime* can be accepted. We will need to determine whether such administrative structures as villagers did possess were subscribed, that is to say developed from within, or imposed from the outside. The former invites a comparison of villages equipped with 'municipal' institutions in emulation of the towns with those lacking independent organs of collective expression and reliant still upon the resources of the seigneurie or the parish. The latter raises questions pertaining to the power of the state in the second half of the eighteenth century. Did the monarchy perform a normative role in successfully fashioning the institutions of village life around a common template, or did it compete uneasily and, in the final analysis, unsuccessfully with sectional providers of administrative *tutelle*: the Provincial Estates, the *parlements* and the sundry *cours des aides* and *chambres des comptes*? The policies of successive reform ministers are known in some detail, as are those pursued by a number of provincial intendants. The outlook of the Estates and of the various sovereign courts in the face of perceived encroachments by 'ministerial' power are not too