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978-0-521-31269-1 - The French Peasantry in the Seventeenth Century

Pierre Goubert

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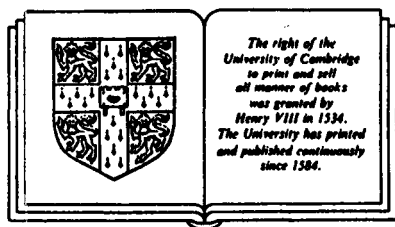
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The French Peasantry in the Seventeenth Century

PIERRE GOUBERT

translated by
IAN PATTERSON



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To Nicholas, Claire, Emmanuel, Isabelle,
and Eric, who may if they so choose one
day find in it a reflection of the lives
of their own distant ancestors, all of
whom were probably peasants, in Anjou,
Berry, Languedoc, Normandy, Brittany,
Burgundy, Limousin, and elsewhere.

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Preface

For years peasants were misrepresented – as pastoral shepherds, shrewd farmers, and country bumpkins – or more often ignored or despised, but recently their image has been refurbished and they have been enthusiastically adopted by the slightly absurd colour-supplement world of urban fashion, although that does not amount to much more than a few exposed beams, country-style stews, Paris-made clogs, restored thatch roofs, some approximate folklore, and a certain amount of disarming ecology. As a result, though, swarms of ethnologists and sociologists, specially equipped and weighed down with instruments and questionnaires, have descended on what still remains of the countryside and put solemn questions to the last surviving village patriarchs, who more often than not make fun of them, apparently without the pseudo-scientists noticing. They talk at length about attitudes, sign language, or traditions, sexuality, inversions and introversions, festivities, carnivals, witches and magicians, deviancies and wanderings, all determinedly rural, and all eagerly ‘written down’ or ‘told’ by people who are as enthusiastic as they are incapable of telling wheat from barley.

It will be clear that this small book was not suggested or undertaken in an attempt to be fashionable. For almost fifty years French historians (and some historians in other countries too), following in the footsteps of Henri Sée, Georges Lefebvre, and Marc Bloch, and their predecessors, have tried to reconstruct the actual

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fabric of peasant life from the Middle Ages to the first years of this century, which has not been an easy task, and has involved sifting through quantities of dusty, semi-legible, and often sybilline archives. Having myself spent over thirty years in the study of this absorbing world, and having done what I could to help or to follow a few small groups of researchers pursuing similar or related work, I hope I have succeeded in recreating this fabric both precisely and accurately. The chapters that follow, which are neither erudite nor complacent (although I am not sure that they give a true picture of everyday life), are limited in scope to the seventeenth century, that is – so far as is practically possible – to the period between the re-establishment of peace in 1598 and the death of Louis XIV. This brings with it the difficulty that the documentation is much less plentiful than it is for the eighteenth century, particularly for the years before the Revolution. And even here, though the Revolution was clearly not unexpected, it is the peasant side which is least documented.

As I was pondering and writing this book it became very clear to me that this series of pictures or snapshots of life (which is really what they are) would have to include more than just the peasants themselves. It would be impossible, for example, to understand peasant life without reference to the priests and the seigneurs. So it seemed more sensible and more honest to give those ubiquitous country figures, and others as well, their proper place in the book. As a result it is not only peasants who appear in this incomplete (though sometimes perhaps over-detailed) sequence of sketches, but I have tried to keep them as straightforward as possible so that my growing grandchildren and those of my non-specialist friends who enjoy reading history may perhaps one day read them without boredom or frustration.

I must also confess that I set myself a wager. I tried to encompass the whole of the French peasantry from Flanders to the Pyrenees and from Brittany to Provence by drawing together all those characteristics which they had in common, but it was always the diversity, the contrasts of language, customs, work, ways of doing things, food, and play which made the strongest impressions, making the attempts at centralisation – or ‘absolutism’ – which mark the seventeenth century a little more than previous ones (though much less than later centuries) look almost risible. At least every province, and every *pays*, should be recognisable in this book, and the

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descendants of their former inhabitants, having glimpsed something of what they used to be like, will be able to turn to the already large number of books which describe, often very eloquently, the regions in all their original individuality.