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P. M. Jones

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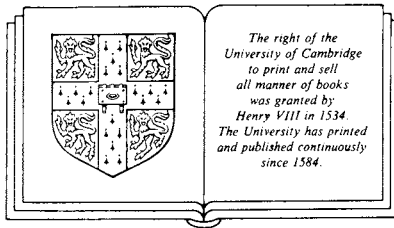
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# *The Peasantry in the French Revolution*

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*Reader in French History  
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*For Carolyn, Nicholas and Anna*

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## *Preface*

This book fills a gap in the literature available to scholars and students on the social history of the French Revolution. As such it is a work of synthesis which contains little in the way of original research, and offers rather an up-to-date account of the part played by the peasantry in the events unfolding in France between 1787 and 1800. The extent to which I have relied upon research undertaken or inspired by Georges Lefebvre will be apparent to all but the most cursory reader. Rural historians owe an especially profound debt to Lefebvre, for it was he who set the terms of the debate over the relationship between the peasantry and the revolution. Fifty years after the publication of his *Paysans du Nord pendant la Révolution française* in 1924, Lefebvre's pioneering analysis of the revolutionary process still enjoyed widespread support. Only in comparatively recent times have scholars begun to examine the role of the peasantry from a different perspective.

Research into the origins of France's peasant revolution had been in progress for nearly two decades when Lefebvre's book came out. Yet the fruits of that research had not filtered into the standard textbooks. They depicted a drama in which the bourgeoisie hogged the stage. Neither the peasantry, nor, for that matter, the nobility played much more than 'walk on' parts. Lefebvre's unique contribution was to rescue the peasantry from the myth of their passivity. Not even the standard authorities, it is true, could overlook the role played by country dwellers in 1789, but Lefebvre formulated a vision of peasant activism which transcended 1789 and the struggle over feudalism. By uncovering clear signs of a pre-revolutionary agrarian crisis, by dislocating the rural insurrections from the fulcrum of 14 July, and by detailing a whole programme of socio-economic reforms which country dwellers expected their legislators to implement, he made the case for a separate, autonomous and intermittently antagonistic peasant revolution locked within the bosom of the bourgeois revolution portrayed in contemporary historiography.

Their relationship was antagonistic because bourgeois and peasant did not see eye to eye on many of the issues brought to the boil by the revolution. The question of common rights over field and fallow divided them, as did that of enclosure, of compulsory crop rotation and of common land partition. Indeed, Lefebvre goes so far as to argue that bourgeois and peasant juxtaposed rival conceptions of property. The former expected the revolution to vindicate absolute or freehold property rights, whereas the latter attached more significance to use or access rights. Even the vaunted joint offensive against the trappings of the feudal regime was not without tension and ambiguity: bourgeois proprietors were content to watch peasant insurgents destroying seigneurial rent rolls, but they were no less eager to form punitive militias when popular violence got out of hand. Would the revolutionary bourgeoisie ever have taken the decision to clear away unredeemed dues, had it not been for the persistent and unremitting pressure of country dwellers? The question is a nice one and serves to remind us that the peasantry should not be excluded from the historical stage.

Lefebvre's singular vision of an autonomous (and largely anti-capitalist) peasant revolution may be found in embryo in his monumental *Paysans du Nord*. Subsequently, he fleshed it out in a series of articles, culminating with a succinct statement of his views entitled: 'La Révolution française et les paysans' which appeared in 1933.<sup>1</sup> Curiously, this enormously influential article did not lead on to a comprehensive study of the peasantry during the revolution, yet no one was better qualified than Georges Lefebvre to write such an account. In the course of a long career as a working historian, he produced a daunting number of textbooks, but only one, *La Grande Peur de 1789* (1932), addressed the central idea of a distinctive peasant revolution. A collection of documents published with a commentary in the same year gives some indication as to how he might have set about drafting a synthetic history of the peasantry during the revolution,<sup>2</sup> but that is all. In a sense, therefore, the present endeavour may be regarded as the book which Lefebvre never wrote. What seems odd, in retrospect, is that no one has thought to write such a book before. True, Edmond Soreau published in 1936 a masterly survey of the urban and rural proletariat during the French Revolution, but his account of events stops abruptly with the deposition of Louis XVI.<sup>3</sup> More recently, Anatoli Ado, the Soviet historian, has mounted a challenge to the interpretation pioneered by Lefebvre in an impressive full-length study of the peasant revolution.<sup>4</sup> Yet his work remains inaccessible to the majority of French and English scholars since it remains untranslated from the Russian, and consequently difficult to use.

Whilst acknowledging Ado's attempt to instil fresh life into the debate

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over how the peasantry apprehended the revolution, the present book substantially endorses the viewpoint formulated by Georges Lefebvre. His work may be criticised on grounds of emphasis and omission; otherwise it has withstood the passage of time and the accretions of scholarship remarkably well. Nobody would today dispute the notion that the peasantry waged their own revolution which imperfectly coincided with that of the bourgeoisie. Perhaps he exaggerates the gulf in order to express his dissent from the prevailing orthodoxies of the late nineteenth century. And it may be that the distinction between peasant and bourgeois conceptions of property is too sharply drawn. Nevertheless, Lefebvre is surely correct in stressing the role of custom and customary agricultural practices in determining collective behaviour at the grass-roots. Whether this equates with a scenario pitting anti-capitalist poor peasants against resolutely modernising legislators has been questioned, by Ado among others. I would not quarrel with Lefebvre's depiction of the peasantry, but I find the capitalist thrust of successive revolutionary Assemblies to be overstated. To be sure, the revolutionary bourgeoisie wanted to press the agrarian reforms of the old monarchy to a successful conclusion. Yet what strikes the modern historian is their relative failure, not their relative success. In the face of massive popular resistance, the revolutionaries eschewed prescriptive legislation: collective rights and communal land holding survived, in consequence, as did much of the fabric of the rural community.

By contrast, the omissions are more glaring, although it would be anachronistic to condemn Lefebvre for failing to answer questions that historians had yet to pose. His is a socio-economic interpretation of peasant responses to the revolution, an interpretation, moreover, which bears the marks of debates current among intellectuals in the early decades of the twentieth century. Implied in the detailed attention which he pays to land ownership and social structure is a comparison between the serf economies of the East and the more settled and differentiated peasant societies of Western Europe. While he was preparing *Les Paysans du Nord*, revolution broke out in the Russian Empire and peasant political parties emerged in several of the successor states of Eastern Europe. Not surprisingly, such events helped to clarify, but also, perhaps, to narrow his understanding of the processes which predisposed country dwellers to collective action. It was feudalism, he believed, which impelled the peasantry into the political arena in the first place, and it was fear of feudalism which kept them there – united and watchful – until the summer of 1792. In marked contrast, the non-economic facets of peasant politicisation receive short shrift. The cultural impact of the French Revolution at the grass-roots goes by default; religion rates scarcely a mention; and the

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integrative function of electoral democracy remains unexplored. As for counter-revolution, Lefebvre was smitten with the myopia common among republican historians of his generation and appears never to have entertained the possibility of a peasant-based movement of opposition to the new regime.

Much new material bearing upon the peasantry has been published in recent decades and this study exploits it to amplify the thesis first laid before the public by Georges Lefebvre in 1924. Every effort has been made to extend that thesis to the cultural and political areas of current concern among historians, as well. Readers will find that the book consists of a series of thematic chapters arranged within a loose chronological format. Chapter 1 identifies the many different types of French peasant and places them in an agrarian context. The second chapter examines the rural dimensions of the malaise afflicting society and government at the end of the *ancien régime*. In chapter 3 chronology is paramount: the peasantry make their debut on the political stage. The illusory gains of that hot summer of peasant activism form the subject matter of chapter 4, while chapter 5 endeavours to elucidate the non-feudal agrarian issues on which bourgeois and peasant were unable to reach agreement. Chapter 6 looks at some of the topics which Lefebvre skates over, notably the impact of dramatic administrative and ecclesiastical reforms on the lives of ordinary country dwellers. The growing sense of exasperation at the invasiveness of the revolution forms the nub of chapter 7, which explores the social underpinnings of both the Terror and counter-revolution. Finally, chapter 8 attempts an answer to the question: 'what had the peasantry learned from the revolutionary experience?'

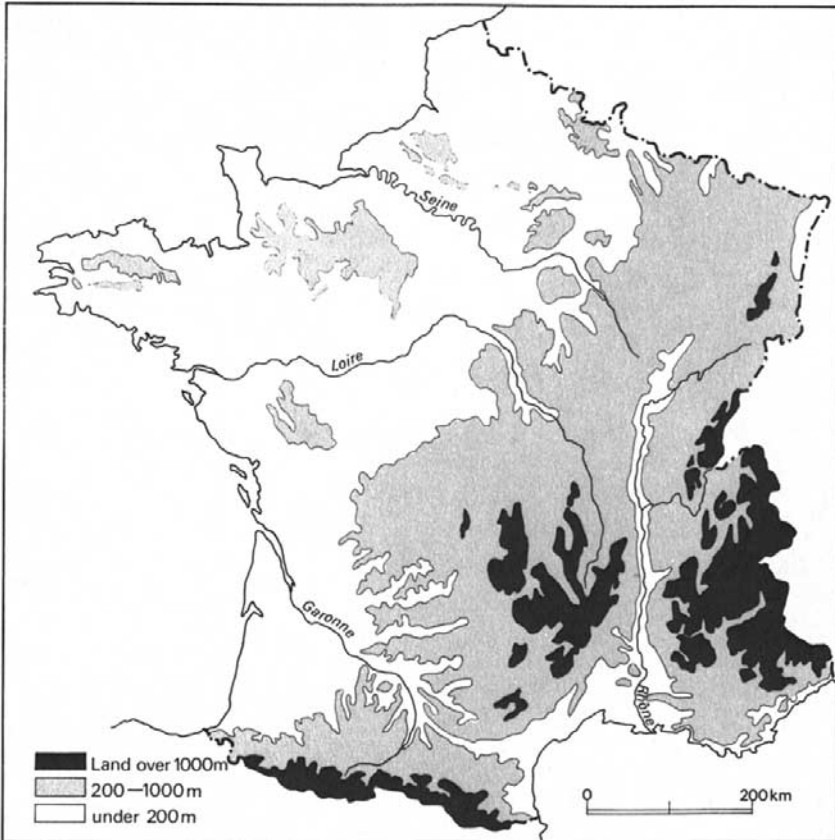
As befits a textbook, scholarly appendages in the form of notes and references have been used sparingly. The attentive reader who wishes to pursue matters in greater depth will find a full list of manuscript and printed sources at the end of the book. All translations from the French are mine.

## *Acknowledgements*

Works of synthesis generate many debts which I have tried to acknowledge in the endnotes and the bibliography. However, several historians played a more active role and deserve particular mention. Alan Forrest, Hilton L. Root, Pierre Lévêque and Donald Sutherland all offered helpful suggestions or advice, whilst Colin Lucas provided both advice and an opportunity to test my views on the French History Graduate Seminar in Balliol College, Oxford. I am indebted to Tim Tackett and to Princeton University Press for their help in drawing up map 12, and to the Centre Départemental de Documentation Pédagogique of Tarbes for permission to reproduce the cover illustration and plates 1, 2 and 5. Funds for basic research in the libraries and archives of France were generously supplied by the British Academy, by the Faculty of Arts Research Grants Committee of Birmingham University and by the School of History (Birmingham University). As for the typescript, it was prepared by Sue Offley with her usual care and efficiency.

## *Abbreviations*

A.D.	Archives Départementales
A.N.	Archives Nationales
<i>Amer. Hist. Rev.</i>	<i>American Historical Review</i>
<i>Annales E.S.C.</i>	<i>Annales, Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations</i>
<i>Ann. hist. Rév. fran.</i>	<i>Annales historiques de la Révolution française</i>
C.D.D.P. Tarbes	Centre Départemental de Documentation Pédagogique de Tarbes
<i>Rev. d'hist mod. et contemp.</i>	<i>Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine</i>



Map 1. Physical geography of modern France