

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51936-6 - Voices of the People in Nineteenth-Century France

David Hopkin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction: Folklore and the historian

---

According to a perceptive critic, my previous book on *Soldier and Peasant in French Popular Culture* was really about ‘the vindication and exegesis of folklore evidence’.<sup>1</sup> That had not been my intention when I sat down to write it, but I recognize that I may have been overtaken by my enthusiasm for the material. This current book was conceived more directly as an exhortation to historians. Firstly, I want them to consider ‘oral literature’ such as tales and songs as appropriate sources for historical analysis; secondly, I want to acquaint them with those aspects of post-war folklore scholarship that provide powerful methodologies for understanding popular culture. I am proselytizing for a ‘folkloric turn’ in history. I suspect this mission will be met with a certain amount of scepticism, perhaps outright derision, from some of my colleagues. So, in this introduction I will set out why such a development might be valuable, and in the chapters that follow provide some examples of how historians might treat folkloric texts.

Two other concerns shaped this book: firstly, the difference in method between practitioners of early modern and modern history; and, secondly, the growing division between practitioners of social and cultural history. I worry that, compared with the early modern period, nineteenth-century historiography appears old-fashioned. An air of stale Victorian solidity clings to the two dominant narratives through which nineteenth-century history is taught. These are the post-Napoleonic triumph of the nation-state on the one hand, and industrialization and economic modernization (with attendant social changes) on the other. It is not that either is wrong – who can argue with the chronology of new state formations or the exponential growth of coal and steel production? – but precisely because in retrospect the outcomes of both these narratives appear inevitable, they can also seem dull. The nation-state is too monolithic: united politically under a single constitution, united economically through an integrated railway system, united culturally through

<sup>1</sup> Peter M. Jones, ‘Review of Hopkin *Soldier and Peasant in French Popular Culture, 1766–1870*’, *English Historical Review* 119 (2004), 232–3.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51936-6 - Voices of the People in Nineteenth-Century France

David Hopkin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 2 Voices of the People in Nineteenth-Century France

compulsory primary schooling, it does not appeal to the postmodern emphasis on fluidity, hybridity and the contingent.

My impression is that early modernists have more fun. They approach their subjects, as Herder approached new periods in history, with the presumption that they might be very different. Their working premise, in the words of Robert Darnton, is that ‘other people are other. They do not think the way we do.’<sup>2</sup> Historians of the early modern are more like explorers: thus they have sought out and ‘discovered’ new and different sources in ritual, gesture, clothing and material culture. I am not sure that modern historians have quite that same sense of distance from their subjects, but why should we not treat the nineteenth century as somewhere equally exotic and different? In fact Darnton himself was looking at nineteenth-century folkloric sources, particularly in his chapter ‘Peasants Tell Tales: The Meaning of Mother Goose’, when he made this claim.<sup>3</sup> His conclusions about folktales have been much criticized by academic folklorists, especially for his supposed identification of national cultural characteristics.<sup>4</sup> A more obvious criticism, however, is his assumption that Mother Goose’s meanings applied to the Old Regime. Not a single one of the tale-tellers mentioned by Darnton was born before 1789, and very few of the narratives he considers were collected before the Third Republic.<sup>5</sup> One might conclude from this almost unconscious slip back in time that the history of *mentalités* – treating the ‘other as other’ – can only be applied to the early modern period: the people of the nineteenth century are too like us. But a contradictory lesson might be that the methods of early modernists are just as relevant to later periods.

The two related innovations that opened up early modern historiography were, firstly, the application of insights derived from the ‘social sciences of culture’, such as anthropology and folklore, to historical sources, and, secondly, the use of microhistorical ‘thick description’. The debt owed to anthropology, and in particular the work of Clifford Geertz (an acknowledged influence on Darnton for one), is better known among anglophone historians, but in continental Europe, where the distinction between

<sup>2</sup> Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (London, 1984), p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 1.

<sup>4</sup> James Fernandez, ‘Historians Tell Tales: Of Cartesian Cats and Gallic Cockfights’, *Journal of Modern History* 60 (1988), 113–127; Elliott Oring and Steven Swann Jones, ‘On the Meanings of Mother Goose’, *Western Folklore* 46 (1987), 106–14.

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, according to an influential literary scholar of the fairytale, it would have been impossible for peasants to have told these fairytales during the Old Regime, as the genre itself only became established in the popular repertoire in post-Revolutionary times! See Ruth Bottigheimer, *Fairy Tales: A New History* (Albany NY, 2009). The ‘Bottigheimer Debate’ is still in full session, but the point is that the apparent archaism of the genre may not be proof of any great age.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51936-6 - Voices of the People in Nineteenth-Century France

David Hopkin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

investigations into the culture of overseas and domestic populations was never so clear-cut, the influence of folkloristics is noticeable.

The chapters that follow are attempts to view the modern period with what might be called a microhistorical sensibility. I use the word sensibility rather than method, because I have not pursued 'the normal exception': the outlier who, by resistance to dominant norms, illumines the unspoken assumptions both among the elite and among the subaltern.<sup>6</sup> This study will not draw on dramatic court cases for its sources; none of the places or people considered in the chapters that follow can be considered exceptional. Nonetheless, they exhibit differences from anywhere and anyone else: they are sufficiently 'other'.

To apply the microhistorical approach to the modern period is not a unique ambition: there are plenty of other books that have attempted to do the same.<sup>7</sup> But my impression is that they have not had the same galvanizing effect on mainstream history writing as those authored by early modernists. The problem appears to be the relation between the pin-point investigation and the established narratives of state-building and modernization. The question of scaling up, always implicit in microhistory, is more evident in the late modern period.<sup>8</sup> Case studies of particular events may be no less interesting in the French Republic or the German Empire than when they occurred in the *généralité* of Lyon or the prince-bishopric of Augsburg, but because the former are so much larger, the question of relevance is more pressing. Early modernists are not under the same obligation to comment on the typicality of their case studies because they seldom have the sources with which to reach such a judgement: late modernists, with the entire legacy of the bureaucratic state at their disposal, have no such excuse. Yet perhaps the virtue of the microhistorical is that it allows us to escape the established unities of time and space, creating room in which to consider alternative configurations. In the conclusion I will argue that folkloric sources, and methodologies derived from folkloristics, do allow us to see the detail and the whole at the

<sup>6</sup> Carlo Ginzburg and Carlo Poni, 'The Name and the Game: Unequal Exchange and the Historiographic Marketplace', in Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero (eds.), *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe* (Baltimore MD, 1991), p. 7. The term was coined by Edoardo Grendi, but has taken on a life of its own, meaning slightly different things to different microhistorians.

<sup>7</sup> One thinks of, and only to cite the examples that have meant the most to me: Joanna Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary: A True Story* (London, 1999); Regina Schulte, *The Village in Court: Arson, Infanticide and Poaching in the Court Records of Upper Bavaria, 1848–1910* (Cambridge, 1994); Peter Sahllins, *Forest Rites: The War of the Demoiselles in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge MA, 1994); Alain Corbin, *The Village of Cannibals: Rage and Murder in France, 1870* (Cambridge MA, 1992). As it happens, none of these authors directly invokes the microhistorical model, and Corbin in particular has, in subsequent publications, emphasized his misgivings about the method.

<sup>8</sup> Caroline Ford, *Divided Houses: Religion and Gender in Modern France* (Ithaca NY, 2005), p. 9.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51936-6 - Voices of the People in Nineteenth-Century France

David Hopkin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 4 Voices of the People in Nineteenth-Century France

same time; they can help us resolve the relationship between the micro and the macro. However, I do not assume that the nation-state is the relevant macro-scale unity.

This is not to say that the chapters that follow are remote from existing historical debates. Each chapter offers a take on an established problematic in social history, and considers how oral cultural sources might elucidate it. This is my final objective for this book: to help engineer a bridge between cultural history and social history. Not all readers will recognize that a gap has emerged between these two sub-disciplines, and not all of those that do will consider a rapprochement desirable. However, within France the ‘cultural turn’ was experienced as an existential crisis which the discipline has still not fully resolved.<sup>9</sup> According to the orthodox model shared by many French historians before 1989, culture was the expression of social identities formed through the experience of subordination and dominance: class, in other words. The problem now is that culture has become a causal factor in its own right. Cultural change is no longer understood to be dependent on social change; it has its own genealogy, it follows its own dynamic, it has its own ‘cultural revolutions’.<sup>10</sup> The issue that has proved so troubling in modern French historiography is that cultural historians believe that the categories used by social historians are themselves created through culture. Neither class, nor ethnicity, nor gender are objective categories that describe a lived reality: they are discourses that give shape to a lived reality. One cannot, therefore, talk about ‘peasant’ culture as if this referred to a set of practices and artefacts that belonged to one social group and not another, because the identity of the group was itself a cultural creation. Peasants could not become Frenchmen, as Eugen Weber argued, because one could only be defined as ‘peasant’ within the discourses of rural/urban, backward/modern, centre/periphery that made up French culture.<sup>11</sup>

A strange consequence of the ‘cultural turn’ is the increased importance of the ‘national’ as a unit of analysis. In theory social history threatened to explode the nation as a useful category of historical thought, though in practice it never managed to do so; in the new cultural history this prospect is even further removed. The reason for this is that cultural history has teamed up with political history. Social identities are now understood to emerge from

<sup>9</sup> Gérard Noiriel, *Sur la ‘crise’ de l’histoire* (Paris, 1996); Roger Chartier, *Au bord de la falaise: L’histoire entre certitudes et inquiétude* (Paris, 1998); François-Joseph Ruggiu, ‘A Way Out of the Crisis: Methodologies of Early Modern Social History in France’, *Cultural and Social History* 6 (2009), 65–86.

<sup>10</sup> Colin Jones and Dror Wahrman (eds.), *The Age of Cultural Revolutions: Britain and France, 1750–1820* (Berkeley CA, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914* (Stanford CA, 1976).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51936-6 - Voices of the People in Nineteenth-Century France

David Hopkin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

political culture, and political culture operates largely, though not exclusively, within an existing political framework. As a result, cultural history has become the handmaiden of historical revisionism and its renewed emphasis on the power of elites, political and intellectual.

For me this illustrates the failed promise of cultural history. The application of literary theory, we were told, would enable historians to read against the grain of their sources, stripping out the rhetoric that surrounded the social groups that we were investigating in order to hear alternative voices.<sup>12</sup> In practice, however, such techniques have led to an obsession with the discourse at the expense of the subject. We cannot now contrast tradition and modernity, as Weber did in *Peasants into Frenchmen*, because now we understand that all supposed ‘traditions’ are really inventions of modernity.<sup>13</sup> We have become used to histories of how sans-culottes, women workers and peasants were imagined by literary and political elites, but our concern not to be tricked by the typologies of these elites has led to the exclusion of actual workers and rural dwellers from these histories. Our reluctance to repeat what others said about peasants, except as an illustration of elite discursive practices, has effectively silenced them.<sup>14</sup>

For some historians this was not an unhappy outcome because it enabled them to cast aside any pretence of interest in the poor and the marginal and return to a largely political history created by elites. As Tim Hitchcock caustically explains, ‘we all had a due sympathy for the benighted and poverty-stricken, they just did not leave the kinds of joyous scripts that the modern historian, influenced by literature, post-modernism and psychology, needed in order to practise their craft’.<sup>15</sup> Instead historians of the nineteenth century have turned their attention to the making of national cultures and the place that the ‘peasant’ and the ‘folk’ as concepts held within them. But it is ironic that those historians most convinced that the nation was invented, most aware of the discursive ends to which ‘traditions’ were put, are the most enslaved to the nationalist, historicist teleologies of the nineteenth century.

I accept that culture possesses its own causal power; however, I would be disappointed if all cultural history offered to do was to replace the ‘iron cages’ of socio-economic determinism with those of cultural determinism.

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Ann Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge MA, 2004), p. 126.

<sup>13</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983).

<sup>14</sup> Although their discussion focuses on Hawaiian islanders, this methodological point is central to the debate between the anthropologists Gananath Obeyesekere and Marshall Sahlins: Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific* (Princeton NJ, 1992); Marshall Sahlins, *How ‘Natives’ Think: About Captain Cook, for Example* (Chicago, 1995).

<sup>15</sup> Tim Hitchcock, ‘A New History from Below’ [a review of Thomas Sokoll (ed.) *Essex Pauper Letters, 1731–1837*], *History Workshop Journal* 57 (2004), 296.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51936-6 - Voices of the People in Nineteenth-Century France

David Hopkin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 6 Voices of the People in Nineteenth-Century France

The mistake that I feel too many cultural historians make is to think of culture as a series of representations revealed in texts, which are presumed to have some formative influence over those exposed to them. It is true that the concepts of ‘reception’ and ‘appropriation’ are regularly evoked, and that these potentially allow the consumers of culture to demonstrate their agency. However, too often the impact on consumers of school-books, conduct manuals, sermons, adverts and music-hall songs is only conjectured, for want of sources. Folklorists have a rather different conception of culture – not as something that impinges on people from the outside, but as something that people do, the stories they themselves tell, the songs they themselves sing, the tools they themselves make, the rituals they themselves enact. No difference can be made between the social and the cultural, no priority given to one over the other, because each narration, each recitation, is simultaneously a cultural performance and a social act. It draws on the cultural resources available to the performer, but it was also shaped by the occasion, the location and the audience for whom it is performed.

**Voices from below**

It would be true that one could only write about bourgeois ‘concepts of the peasant’, and not about how those labelled peasants understood themselves, if only the bourgeois had left us any material to examine. As always, the nub of the issue is the availability of sources. It has become a cliché of historical writing that, as Daniel Roche put it in his introduction to the autobiography of the Parisian glazier and *sans-culotte* Jacques-Louis Ménétra (1738–1812) ‘from the point of view of the historian, the poor are silent.’<sup>16</sup> ‘It is always hard for the historian to catch the voices and understand the feelings of the common people’, argues Nicholas Rodger in his introduction to the autobiography of the common seaman William Spavens (1735–99).<sup>17</sup> Of course the assertion is not that the poor were actually silent, or that the common people possessed no voice, but that theirs was an oral culture which went unrecorded at the time and so has been lost to later generations. Therefore, when writing the history of subaltern groups, one is necessarily forced to look at the sources about them, rather than the sources they produced themselves. According to William Sewell, ‘Historians working on peasants, workers, slaves, women, colonized peoples were limited to what was written down and saved in

<sup>16</sup> Daniel Roche, ‘Introduction: The Autobiography of a Man of the People’, in Jacques-Louis Ménétra, *Journal of My Life*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York, 1986), p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> N. A. M. Rodger, ‘Introduction’, in William Spavens, *The Narrative of William Spavens, A Chatham Pensioner by Himself: A Unique Lower Deck View of the Eighteenth-Century Navy* (London, 1988), p. vii.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51936-6 - Voices of the People in Nineteenth-Century France

David Hopkin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

archives or libraries – often not in such people’s own words but in those of their “betters” or governors.’<sup>18</sup> The fear is that the latter will not be good amanuenses for the former, that they will misreport their views, and impose on the historian their own understandings of work, slavery, gender and colonization.

For the first generation of post-war social historians such silences did not pose major methodological problems. One may not have known what the poor said, but thanks to the archives maintained by their governors, one knew what they had done – whom they had married, where they had lived, to whom they had left their little property, what they had produced. All of these factors lent themselves to quantitative analysis, and as it was the aggregate behaviour of the common people that produced historically significant change, it was at the aggregate level that they should be studied. Individual voices were not significant. However, quantitative social history, though illuminating, has proved unsatisfactory on a number of counts. Measuring outcomes did not in itself reveal the decision-making processes behind those actions. What degree of choice did the masses exercise over who to marry and where to live? Were their lives completely bounded by economic need, technological limitation and social expectation? Did they sense their imprisonment and rail against it, or were they barely aware of the structuring elements in their own lives? These questions were posed most directly when historians were studying the moments when peasants and workers challenged the conditions under which they lived. The actions of the food rioter and the rick burner implied some degree of agency, a subterranean ideology of resistance,<sup>19</sup> but while the historian could obtain many insights from the symbols deployed by the crowd, it was not quite the same as having access to their own opinions, uttered freely. The same questions could be asked about more mundane but no less crucial decisions, such as the age at which to marry or the number of children to have.

There was another canker eating through the will of quantitative social historians. The aggregate categories that they promoted as historical actors were of their own devising. It was the historian who placed the individual in a class, or allocated them to a nuclear or extended family, but there was no way of knowing whether persons in the past perceived themselves as members of these groups. Perhaps they attached no importance to their class interests but

<sup>18</sup> William H. Sewell Jr, ‘Geertz, Cultural Systems and History: From Synchrony to Transformation’, *Representations* (Special Issue: ‘The Fate of “Culture”: Geertz and Beyond’) 59 (1997), 38–9.

<sup>19</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and George Rudé, *Captain Swing* (London, 1969); E. P. Thompson, ‘The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century’, *Past and Present* 50 (1971), 76–136; Adrian Randall and Andrew Charlesworth (eds.), *The Moral Economy and Popular Protest: Crowds, Conflict and Authority* (Houndsmills, 2000).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51936-6 - Voices of the People in Nineteenth-Century France

David Hopkin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 8 Voices of the People in Nineteenth-Century France

put all their energies into their religious life. If the poor had agency, then it was their subjective assessment of where their loyalties lay that would create the solidarities that generated historical change. And even if the historian's aggregate categories retained some objective vitality, any individual might pass through several categories in a single lifetime, from peasant to worker to nouveau riche. Analysis at the group level would completely miss the decisions that created such personal trajectories, but it was precisely these choices that led to major historical changes, such as migration from country to town or to overseas colony. A qualitative social history was called for, one which investigated individual choices even among the illiterate masses.

This was the problem that faced historians of Roche and Sewell's generation. They recognized that peasants, workers, slaves, women and colonized peoples had been participants in the great transformations of history such as industrialization, urbanization, mass migration, and the boom and decline of fertility. Without some sense of their contribution to these events, no evaluation could be reached about their causes and outcomes. They also recognized that to rely on the words of their 'betters' or 'governors' might create a distorted image. Not only were they reluctant to accept the elite's view of the poor, but more fundamentally they questioned the elite's concept of what mattered in history. With knowledge of the people 'hidden from history' (a phrase that has been applied to all these groups) would come evidence of local resistance to the rise of the nation-state and capitalist production, and with it alternative visions of the past, which were also possible pathways to a better future.

For all these reasons it was imperative to recover voices 'from below'. Since the late 1960s, great efforts have been made to find sources for those social groups who had little control over official archives. The publication of Ménétra's and Spavens' narratives form part of that endeavour, which is ongoing. There is no place here to investigate the invigorating experiments in social history of the late twentieth century, with its overlapping practitioners of history from below, microhistory, historical anthropology, feminist history and oral history, nor explore all the methodologies they devised. What has become clear, however, is that the archives of the poor are not quite so empty as had once been assumed. For the modern period this is true even for the kind of ego-documents – memoirs, diaries, letters – that had already been used as sources for the history of more privileged social groups. The growth of popular interest in history, and in particular genealogy, is daily bringing more such documents into the public realm. It is now possible to talk of 'a new history of writing from below'.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Martyn Lyons, 'The New History from Below: The Writing Practices of European Peasants, c.1850–c.1920', in Anna Kuismin and Matthew Driscoll (eds.), *Reading and Writing From Below: Processes and Practices of Literacy in the 19th century Nordic Sphere*, forthcoming.



However, working-class and (much rarer) peasant autobiographies present problems of interpretation for the historian. Some of these are integral to the genre as a whole. For example, they tend to be ‘end-of-life’ narratives framed towards a particular purpose such as the edification of children. Authors sift and improve those aspects of their past they wish to parade, and they neglect other aspects that they consider unimportant or damaging. And then there is the problem of faulty, rather than selective memory. Of course such self-fashionings also offer opportunities to the historian. The larger problem is that popular autobiographers such as Spavens and Ménétra are not particularly representative of the historically silent majority. They were more likely to be male, old, literate and urban, whereas the population as a whole was female, young, illiterate and rural. Sometimes such autobiographers had become estranged from their own social background, separated by educational opportunities or by ‘consciousness-raising’ experiences in the leadership of labour and/or radical movements.<sup>21</sup> For France, and just to name some of the better-known examples, one might place the memoirs of Valentin Jameray-Duval, Pierre-Jakez Hélias and Émilie Carles in the former group, and those of Martin Nadaud, Agricol Perdiguier and Émile Guillaumin in the latter.<sup>22</sup> Other forms of exile, such as military service, could generate schisms. For both the Breton weaver turned soldier Jean Conan and the Breton beggar turned soldier Jean-Marie Déguignet, their writings became outlets for their thoughts when no one else would listen – companions in their isolation even from members of their immediate families.<sup>23</sup> There is a danger in making such memoirs speak for collective experiences. As their compilation was not a typical activity for their social group, they were obliged to look to models taken from outside the oral culture that characterized that social group. Literary genres, such as the picaresque or the accumulation of sufferings

<sup>21</sup> These issues are discussed by Alfred Kelly (ed.), *The German Worker: Working-Class Autobiographies from the Age of Industrialization* (Berkeley CA, 1987); Mark Traugott (ed.), *The French Worker: Autobiographies from the Early Industrial Era* (Berkeley CA, 1993); and in particular Mary Jo Maynes, *Taking the Hard Road: Life Course in French and German Workers' Autobiographies in the Era of Industrialization* (Chapel Hill NC, 1995).

<sup>22</sup> Valentin Jameray-Duval, *Mémoires: Enfance et éducation d'un paysan au XVIIIe siècle*, ed. Jean-Marie Goulemot (Paris, 1981); Pierre-Jakez Hélias, *The Horse of Pride: Life in a Breton Village* (New Haven CN, 1978); Émilie Carles, *A Life of Her Own: The Transformation of a Countrywoman in Twentieth-Century France* (London, 1992); Martin Nadaud, *Léonard, maçon de la Creuse*, ed. Jean-Pierre Rioux (Paris, 1998); Agricol Perdiguier, *Mémoires d'un compagnon* (Moulins, 1914); Émile Guillaumin, *The Life of a Simple Man*, ed. Eugen Weber (London, 1983).

<sup>23</sup> Jean Conan, *Avanturiero ar Citoien Jean Conan a Voengamb: Les Aventures du citoyen Jean Conan de Guingamp*, ed. and trans. Bernard Cabon, Jean-Christophe Cassard, Paolig Combot et al. (Morlaix, 1990); Jean-Marie Déguignet, *Histoire de ma vie: Texte intégral des mémoires d'un paysan bas-breton* (Ar Releg-Kerhuon, 2001).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51936-6 - Voices of the People in Nineteenth-Century France

David Hopkin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

detailed in saints' lives, influenced what, and how, they wrote. In studying them we may learn more about their acculturation than their origins.

There is a particular danger here in that the closer they come culturally to us – their literate, historically aware observers – the more their concerns will speak to our own. The most quoted autobiographies are those that address 'the Important Questions of the Age, as defined by our historiographical agenda'.<sup>24</sup> Those writings that were more integrated into the lives of the community – such as peasants' *livres de raison* that record a seemingly random selection of personal and national items of news, debts, weather observations, prayers and recipes – appear more remote, and are more difficult to interpret.<sup>25</sup>

I do not dismiss the value of such autobiographies; indeed I use fishermen's memoirs extensively in Chapter 2. But the essential problem with peasant autobiographers as far as the historian is concerned is that they were self-consciously behaving in non-peasant ways. This is why Alain Corbin chose precisely someone who had never committed one word to paper, or ever drawn the attention of his 'betters', in his bravura attempt to resurrect one social atom among the people 'swallowed up by history'. His choice, the clog-maker Louis-François Pinagot, was not necessarily 'typical' in any regard other than his very obscurity. It was this that made him more representative of the 'low multitudes' than any of the autobiographers named above: 'people who, by the mere fact of taking up their pens, excluded themselves from the milieus they described'. However, Corbin's choice creates other difficulties. As Pinagot had very little opportunity to influence the research agenda, Corbin had to shape his narrative around the existing historiographical debates concerning rural France, including 'the collapse of the temporal structure of French society, the fabrication of new spaces in a countryside steeped in nostalgia . . . the inception and development of the sciences of man and of the social survey, the invention of the notion of traditional society and of the communal monograph, and of course the rise of individualism and the development of new modalities for the construction of self and citizen'. But as Corbin goes on to admit, we cannot know whether Pinagot was aware of these processes, or if he attached any importance to them.<sup>26</sup> What emerges from Corbin's study is less an individual making sense of his own life than a Pinagot-shaped hole. If the full potential of 'history from below' is to be

<sup>24</sup> Ann Kussmaul, 'Introduction', in Joseph Mayett, *The Autobiography of Joseph Mayett of Quainton, 1783–1839*, Buckinghamshire Record Society 23 (Aylesbury, 1986), p. xviii.

<sup>25</sup> Klaus-Joachim Lorenzen-Schmidt and Bjørn Poulsen (eds.), *Writing Peasants: Studies on Peasant Literacy in Early Modern Northern Europe* (Kerteminde, 2002). For a French *livre de raison* see Marie-Françoise Savey-Canard, 'Des laboureurs racontent leur histoire: Un livre de raison aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles', *Études foréziennes* 8 (1976), 43–60.

<sup>26</sup> Alain Corbin, *The Life of an Unknown: The Rediscovered World of a Clog Maker in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge MA, 2001), pp. vii–xiii.