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0521533147 - Classes, Estates, and Order in Early Modern Brittany

James B. Collins

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This book uses the Breton experience to address two fundamental historiographical issues: the meaning of absolutism and the nature of early modern French society. Drawing on economic, social, and institutional approaches, Professor Collins develops an integrated analysis of state-building in France.

The classes and their interests are analyzed first, in an examination of the Breton economy, and then the social system and the political superstructure that preserved it. Finally, Professor Collins addresses the question of order itself. How did the elites preserve order? What order did they wish to preserve? His analysis suggests that early modern France was a much more unstable, mobile society than previously thought; that absolutism existed more in theory than in practice; and that local elites and the Crown compromised in mutually beneficial ways to maintain their combined control over society. They imposed a new order, one neither feudal nor absolutist, on a society reexamining the meaning of basic structures such as the relationship of the family and the individual, the role of women in society, and property.

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*Edited by Professor J.H. Elliott, University of Oxford,
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JAMES B. COLLINS

Professor of History, Georgetown University



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Preface

My interest in Brittany began half a lifetime ago, during a trip around Europe with one of my college roommates, Gregg Hillman. Gregg's aunt and uncle, Lorraine and Georges de Braux, lived in Nevez and graciously put us up for a few days. Georges, though a Norman, had an infectious enthusiasm for his adopted *pays*. So began my attraction to this strange and somewhat gloomy peninsula, whose people often reminded me of the Irish-American ghosts of my childhood.

One tradition Bretons share with the Irish is that of hospitality. My family and I have received many kindnesses from Bretons in every corner of the province. My greatest debt, both personal and professional, is to Jean Tanguy and his family. Jean has been the most generous of mentors and he and Marie-Claire have sheltered a wandering American historian more times than I dare to admit. No words can express my appreciation to them.

In any long project one builds up a mountain of obligations; indeed, one of the most sobering of deeds is to write a preface because it reminds the often solitary researcher how tied even he is to countless others. Some of those ties are personal, to people who have stood by you in difficult times. My oldest friend, Will Rogers, and his wife Edna, fall into that category, not only for harboring a penniless graduate student during his first month at Columbia, but for a lifetime of joyful memories. Other ties are both personal and professional, such as those to colleagues like Bob Weiner and Don Miller at Lafayette College or Marcus Rediker and Andrzej Kaminski at Georgetown. All historians who read these lines will understand the unique combination of professional and personal support one receives from those colleagues one is privileged to call friends as well.

One's professional obligations are more numerous, both to those in the field and to the unsung heroes of historical scholarship, the archivists. I have benefited enormously from the assistance and professionalism of the archivists all over Brittany; in all five departmental archives, especially those at Rennes and Nantes, in many municipal archives, and even from those with private papers. The municipal archivists at Nantes are a special pair whose good humor has been as much of a tonic as their efficiency has been an invaluable aid. At Rennes, Mme. Reydellet has often gone out of her way to alert me to newly

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classified materials and to aid me in every conceivable task. The archivists at Rennes and Nantes, M. Charpy and M. du Boisrouvray, can well be proud of their staffs. I would also like to thank Ron Robbins of the Lafayette College library for his special assistance.

The list of colleagues, French and American, whom I might thank is too long to reproduce. In France, Bernard and Ségolène Barbiche have been extremely kind to me (and my family) through the years; Bernard has also offered much sage professional counsel. In recent years, I have been fortunate to come to know Alain Croix and his family. Alain has provided criticisms only he could, while he and Nicole have been most generous to the Collins family.

In America, the Ancien Régime study group in the D.C. area has shared its criticisms and ideas with me. Farther afield, Jon Dewald, Liana Vardi, and Sarah Hanley have provided new insights in their comments to various conference papers related to this manuscript. I have also had the pleasure of discussing a wide range of matters with colleagues at the United Nations Population Fund. Two of them, Hirofumi Ando and Rafael Salas, offered me their friendship and their mentorship. I am particularly saddened that I cannot share this work with Rafael Salas, one of the most outstanding individuals whom I have ever known, a genuine force for good in the world whose life ended far too early.

Three people, however, have a special, albeit unknown to them, relationship to the manuscript. I had come to a dead end with the material and simply did not know where to turn. At the AHA that year, I had a long talk with Bill Beik and Kristen Neuschel; their new approaches to similar material reinvigorated my interest in state-building and social structures. A few months later, we renewed those conversations at the French Historical Studies meeting. The third member of the group, Phil Hoffman, shared there his thoughts about the economy and agriculture of early modern France. After my meetings with Bill, Kristen, and Phil, I was able to come back to my mass of archival data and make some sense of it. I offer them the ritual absolution – all that follows is my responsibility – but I will say that this book would never have seen the light of day without their inspiration.

Several foundations and universities supported various stages of my research and writing. I would like to thank the Ecole des Hautes Etudes, the Economic History Association, the American Council for Learned Societies, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Mellon Foundation, Columbia University, Lafayette College, and Georgetown University for their financial assistance.

Special thanks as well go to Richard Fisher, my indefatigable editor at Cambridge, and to Frances Nugent, who copy-edited the manuscript.

My ongoing source of personal inspiration, my family, deserves the final thanks. My first book was dedicated to my father and his hands rest lightly upon this one as well, but I would offer this one as a gift to the living. All of them, as it

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happens, are women. They have broadened my professional perspectives about women in history in ways I would never have imagined fifteen years ago. To my mother and my sisters I offer thanks for their support (and to Mom for the doggedness gene so essential in the archives!). To three special little girls – Anna, Liz, and Margaret – their dad says thanks for being such good sports about going to a strange country and, well, just for being who you are.

And the first shall be last: Nancy has been with this project from the beginning, from the miserable hovel we occupied in Rennes to the frantic scrambles between town archives to the family trips to France, with their incredible childcare burdens. She has shared the hopes and travails of this book; it is only fair that it be dedicated to her.

Abbreviations

AC	Archives communales
AD	Archives départementales
AM	Archives municipales
AN	Archives nationales
BM	Bibliothèque municipale
BN	Bibliothèque nationale
CN	Côtes du Nord
F	Finistère
IV	Ille-et-Vilaine
LA	Loire Atlantique
M	Morbihan
Mss Fr	Manuscrits français
NAF	Nouvelles acquisitions françaises

Glossary of French terms

Whenever possible, I have tried to translate the French terms into English. Certain words or phrases, however, make no sense in a straightforward translation, so I have kept them in French. The principal ones appear below.

alloué Second ranking judge at Breton seneschalsy courts.

bêtes vives Export tax on livestock leaving Brittany. Throughout the period in question here, the king leased this tax farm in conjunction with that of the *ports et havres*.

brieux Royal (seigneurial) right to salvage of shipwrecks. Leased jointly with the *ports et havres*. Some Breton seigneurs, notably the Rohan family, had such rights in certain parts of the coastline.

élection Local financial district. In the fourteenth century, the French state created a tax system based on local districts supervised by an elected official (*élu*). He gave his name to the district he supervised, the *élection*, even though, after the 1360s, these officials ceased to be elected. Please note that Brittany did not have any tax officials called *élus*. Unfortunately (for the sake of clarity), Brittany did have *élus*; the province used that name for the “elected” (i.e. selected) parish member of the royal militia, for which the king levied a direct tax in the sixteenth century.

feu Literally, a hearth. In fourteenth-century Brittany, the duke fixed the fiscal *feu* as three real households. Over time, this relationship disintegrated but the fiscal *feu* never represented an actual hearth.

fouage Hearth tax. In Brittany, the main direct tax was the *fouage* rather than the *taille*. Through most of the period in question here, the *fouage* had a fixed rate of about 8.6 livres per *feu*.

généralité Regional financial district. The districts took their name from their chief officer, the *général*. Most *généralités* had a large complement of officers, organized into a *bureau des finances*. Brittany provided the lone exception, as it had only two *généraux*. Francis I merged the offices of *général* and treasurer of France (the latter responsible for oversight of the king’s demesne). In the text, these officials are referred to as treasurers of France.

lieutenant particulier Local military commander. Brittany had a royal governor, a royal lieutenant general (on occasion, two lieutenants general, one for

Glossary of French terms

Nantes and one for the rest of the province), and three *lieutenants particuliers* – one each for the bishopric of Nantes, for Upper Brittany (bishoprics of Rennes, Saint-Malo, Dol, and Saint-Brieuc), and for Lower Brittany (bishoprics of Vannes, Quimper, Léon, and Tréguier).

livre French pound (known as the *livre tournois* or pound of Tours). The *livre* was a money of account, not a real coin.

livre breton Breton pound. Five Breton pounds equalled six French pounds. The *fouage* rate was always listed in Breton pounds (after the 1540s, as 7.35 Breton pounds per *feu*), as were most of the transit and export–import duties, thus a given commodity might pay 8 Breton pence (*deniers*) per barrel. Like the *livre tournois*, the *livre breton* was, throughout our period, merely a money of account. The *livre breton* is also known as the *livre monnaie*.

noblesse d'épée Nobility of the sword, that is, those from an old (i.e. medieval) noble family. In Brittany, many members of this group owned judicial offices (especially at the Parlement), so the distinction robe/sword does not provide much insight.

noblesse de robe Nobility of the robe, that is, those ennobled by virtue of their office. Referred to in the text simply as the *robe*; the members of the group are called *robins*.

pays d'élection The area covered by *élection* districts, that is, the regions under the authority of the Estates General of Languedoc that voted taxation in the 1360s. Only Normandy among the original *pays d'Etats* also had *élections*, although Dauphiné and the southwestern regions received them in the first half of the seventeenth century. The king levied the standard royal taxes, notably the *taille*, in the *pays d'élection*.

pays d'Etats Provinces that still had Estates in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The main ones were Béarn, Brittany, Burgundy, Dauphiné, Languedoc, Normandy, Provence, and the small regions (*pays*) of the southwest, such as Quercy and Périgord. The southwestern regions lost their estates in 1621, Dauphiné lost them in the 1630s, and Normandy in the 1650s.

ports et havres Export–import duties of the eight Breton bishoprics other than Nantes. The Rohan family possessed these duties in one small area of the bishopric of Léon and the duke had abandoned the export–import duties of Saint-Malo to the town itself in the fourteenth century.

prévôté de Nantes Export–import duties of the bishopric of Nantes, covering products leaving/arriving by sea as well as those coming from France (by land or by river).

seigneur Landlord. I have used this term throughout to indicate a landlord who possessed feudal rights. In so doing I am following the practices of early modern writers in an effort to simplify terminology. In reality, the terms *seigneur* and *sieur* could overlap. *Seigneurs* are often listed in documents merely as *sieur* of “x”; a simple *sieur* was never called a *seigneur*. A *seigneur* owned a *seigneurie*.

Glossary of French terms

sieur Landlord. I have used this term to refer to landlords who did not possess feudal rights. Some *sieurs* possessed relatively small estates but others could have quite substantial properties, called *sieuries*. Many *seigneurs* (indeed probably a majority of them) owned *sieuries* as well as *seigneuries*.

Money 1 *livre* = 20 *sous* = 240 *deniers*

From 1576 until 1602, the state used the *écu* as the money of account; during that period one *écu* = 3 *livres*. (Please note that the value of the *écu* varied over time, as it was a real coin.) The people used a wide variety of real coins, both French (*liards* worth 3 *deniers*, *francs*, half *francs*, *écus*, and others) and Spanish (*réales*, *pistoles*). Spanish coins were so prevalent in western France that peasants continued to use the *réal* as a money of account until the twentieth century.