

Swarthmore College

Works

History Faculty Works

History

12-1-1978

Review Of "Life In Renaissance France" By L. Febvre

Robert S. DuPlessis

Swarthmore College, rduples1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Let us know how access to these works benefits you

Recommended Citation

Robert S. DuPlessis. (1978). "Review Of "Life In Renaissance France" By L. Febvre". *Journal Of Modern History*. Volume 50, Issue 4. 749-751. DOI: 10.1086/241804
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history/242>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by . It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.



Review

Author(s): Robert S. DuPlessis

Review by: Robert S. DuPlessis

Source: *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 50, No. 4 (Dec., 1978), pp. 749-751

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1876775>

Accessed: 11-06-2015 19:37 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of Modern History*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

There are no comparisons of migrants and nonmigrants, craftsmen and service workers, textile workers and chain makers, city dwellers and villagers, servants and shopkeepers. Meacham simply does not use systematic comparison. Nor does he place his individuals into the context of economic and political structural change. He refers not at all to the rich, emerging literature of working-class history. Much of this literature is still, to be sure, mostly in article form, and it does not always concern England between 1890 and 1914. Nevertheless, it is full of ideas and concepts about the political challenge and integration of the working class. On strikes, for example, he refers only to a 1954 article by Arthur Kornhauser. Nor does he seem to know the issues in contemporary family history. He disagrees, quite reasonably, with the views of Louis Wirth and Talcott Parsons, put forth thirty or more years ago, but he has no alternative to offer.

Contrary to his purpose, Meacham's descriptive detail, rich and interesting as it is, surrounds us with trees and never shows us the forest.

LOUISE A. TILLY

University of Michigan

Life in Renaissance France. By *Lucien Febvre*. Edited and translated by *Marian Rothstein*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977. Pp. xx+163. \$8.95.

Among the side effects of the upsurge of interest in the work of historians associated with the journal *Annales: Economies, sociétés, civilisations* has been the publication of some of the works of Lucien Febvre, co-founder with Marc Bloch of the journal in 1929. Peter Burke has recently edited a collection of essays by Febvre under the title *A New Kind of History* (New York, 1973), and now Marian Rothstein has translated five of Febvre's articles based on lectures dating from 1925.

Though Febvre intended to show "what was truly characteristic of the highest and most original parts" (p. 1) of French civilization in the sixteenth century, *Life in Renaissance France* is in fact a capsule account of the social roots—or, as we shall see, the social root—of the religious and cultural temper of the age. Writing in opposition to the then-prevailing treatment of the Renaissance, Humanism, and the Reformation as episodes in the history of idea, Febvre suggested that they could be more accurately understood as the products of the specific mental habits of Frenchmen of the time. His concern was not so much with the content of the new learning, art, and faith as with their causes.

Convinced that habits of mind were themselves the product of their environment, Febvre opened with an—admittedly impressionistic—description of the salient material conditions underlying early modern French culture. He emphasized the predominantly rural cast of sixteenth-century life, as well as its harshness and frequently unsettled quality, illustrating the latter point by chronicling the peregrinations of the court during just one year. The middle three chapters are devoted to an explanation of the new forms which the quest for knowledge, beauty, and God took in the sixteenth century. Febvre argued that peace, prosperity, and printing all contributed to a transformed consciousness which in turn brought forth a new civilization. But at bottom each cultural shift could be traced back to

“change in the social order” (pp. 54, 71, and *passim*)—in particular, to the rise of the bourgeoisie. Whether looking at the development of humanism, the adoption of first the Flemish and then the Italian styles of painting, or the spread of the reformed religion, Febvre insisted that the “rising, prospering, growing, winning” middle classes were the critical factor in the transformation. In light of this monocausal emphasis, Rothstein was surely justified in including Febvre’s closely related essay on the “aristocracy of capital,” the financiers and merchants who represented the spectacular upper stratum of the advancing bourgeoisie.

While *Life in Renaissance France* is brief, it provides stimulating comments on such diverse and diverting topics as the role of France as cultural intermediary during the Middle Ages and the coarse actual appearance of the women of legendary beauty in the Renaissance court. Like all of Febvre’s works, these essays also contain a number of entertaining stories, such as those about Thomas Platter, Valais peasant turned rope-maker and humanist, or Guillaume Farel, indomitable reformer. The translation renders Febvre’s style very well, while flattening the rhetorical excesses to which he was on occasion prone. A most valuable feature of the book is the copious notes which Rothstein has added to clarify Febvre’s sometimes obscure references and to identify more recent works on various subjects.

For all that it is a good read, however, this is not an important book for historians, whether specialists in the field or not. The essays show their age: as the notes indicate, many of Febvre’s more suggestive remarks have been followed up in great detail during the half century since he wrote, while the particular controversies in artistic and intellectual history to which Febvre directed much of his attention no longer stir much excitement, scholarly or otherwise. Moreover, *Life in Renaissance France* is far too short to permit more than the sketchiest depiction of the subjects which are raised, to present much sense of development and change, or to portray the rich regional and social diversity of early modern France. Febvre’s later and longer studies in historical psychology, including *Le Problème de l’incroyance au seizième siècle: La religion de Rabelais* (Paris, 1942), are much more subtle, detailed, and successful. Unable in the present work to elaborate on his points, Febvre relies on anecdote and, all too frequently, on rhetoric. The conclusion to chapter 4—a long quotation from Proudhon on the Reformation as the origin of “the moral rule of liberty”—is the worst but not, unfortunately, the only example of the substitution of exhortation for demonstration. The book’s major thesis is its most serious problem, for Febvre’s admirable attempt to trace the social sources of cultural change is persistently and simplistically narrowed to the rise of the middle class. Never really argued, much less proven, this vague concept is forced to explain everything innovative from the end of the fourteenth century on.

It remains true, as Franklin Ford notes in the foreword, that not enough attention has been paid to sixteenth-century France. Despite the recent work of scholars like Natalie Davis, Martin Wolfe, and A. N. Galpern, there are few English language books on the period before the Wars of Religion. But these fifty-year-old lecture notes are little help in remedying that deficiency. Our understanding of early modern France would be far better served if the appearance of Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie’s magisterial *Peasants of Languedoc* (abridged English trans., Urbana, Ill., 1974) and Robert Mandrou’s suggestive *Introduction to Modern France, 1500–1640* (English trans., Lon-

don, 1975) were to be followed by the translation of even abridged versions of some of the great regional studies of the "Annales school," books like Richard Gascon's *Grand Commerce et vie urbaine au XVI^e siècle: Lyon et ses marchands (1520–1580)* (Paris and The Hague, 1971) or Febvre's own *Philippe II et la Franche-Comté* (1912; abridged ed., Paris, 1970).

ROBERT S. DUPLESSIS

Swarthmore College

Les Bourgeois Gentilshommes: An Essay on the Definition of Elites in Renaissance France. By *George Huppert*.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977. Pp. xii+237. \$18.50.

George Huppert makes a useful contribution to an understanding of elites in early modern France—roughly the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries—but the contribution may not be what he intended or what readers familiar with the subject are looking for.

Les Bourgeois Gentilshommes spends a good deal of time in its opening section and occasionally in other parts of the book harping on the notion that there was a class neither noble nor bourgeois. These are "families which deny that they are bourgeois, insist they are 'living nobly,' and complain about being treated as inferiors by the *gentilshommes*" (p. 4). It is to designate this nonbourgeois elite that the author utilizes the English term "gentry." This is a mistake, in my estimation, for the connotations associated with the term in English society are not fairly applied across the channel. Huppert is aware of the dissimilarities, one gathers, for at one point he says the group might just as well be called "X." As long as working definitions are supplied, as he does in his treatment, perhaps no harm is done except to readers inadequately versed in the complexities of French and English social history.

Huppert overestimates his originality in calling attention to the existence of this elite. Mousnier's exhaustive study of *officiers* and Franklin Ford's study of *noblesse de robe* are, to say the least, partial approaches to the same general group, and the several local studies—of Chateaudûn, Amiens, Beauvais, Dijon, and others—summarized by Huppert provide ample indication that others have been aware that at the top of French society were families not easily labeled as either bourgeois or noble.

Terminology is at least part of the question. One approach is to use the terms that were contemporary to the period being studied. There are many of these, for contemporaries too had to try to describe their own society. *Officiers*, *noblesse de robe*, *noblesse civile*, *noblesse de cloche*, and *bourgeoisie parlementaire* are some of the possibilities, and if a term like *officiers* is too broad, since there were offices on levels far inferior to the group under consideration, there are adjectives that can delimit the group as required. Another approach to the question of social class ignores the terminology of the time and follows an "interactive model" in working out the patterns of societal relationships. Thus Michael Meiselman's paper on "The Social Structure of Dijon on the Eve of the Revolution," presented at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in December 1977. Huppert is somewhere between these two stools, not satisfied with