

Potpourri

Itineraries of a researcher

by RICHARD COBB

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From a purely material point of view the immense archival wealth of France, at national, departmental and municipal levels would appear to be much better provided for than in the post-Liberation period of the second half of the 1940s and the early 1950s. Papers have been better housed, in drier conditions, and often placed in new boxes; in many Departments, *archives communales* have been removed from the attics and basements of village *mairies* and small-town *hôtels-de-ville* and deposited in the central depots of each *chef-lieu*, thus making them more readily accessible and cutting down on the number of itineraries previously imposed on the researcher. Of course, much will depend on the degree of zeal and pertinacity displayed by individual Departmental archivists in the task of rounding up mutinous and elusive local records. But, generally speaking, it is reasonable to assume that, for the revolutionary period and for those that follow it, the *archives départementales* will by now house pretty well all of the surviving village records. In perhaps a majority of Departments, new *dépôts d'archives* have been built, often on a lavish scale, rendering the papers that they contain, if not more accessible (accessibility seems to *decrease* in exact proportion to improvements in building conditions) at least better preserved from archival rats and rodents, damp and neglect.

In the 1940s, many local records had been temporarily mislaid (looking for them greatly added to the excitement of research), many more had been destroyed as a result of official paper drives during the Vichy period. And, in the Eure, for instance, quantities of public records had found their way into the hands of private *marchands d'auto-graphes* and of rag-and-bone men. In the weekly markets of such places as Louviers and Vernon, *brévets d'officiers* of the revolutionary and Napoleonic periods could be found in the boxes of second-hand booksellers, while *assignats* vied with American-printed 100-franc notes and those, rather better produced, by Parisian or provincial forgers. Archives came as a very low priority with the Vichy régime, which, one suspects, was often not unduly disturbed by the loss or the destruction of the paper records of a then much-decried revolutionary period.

In Rouen, for instance, the Vichy Prefect had expelled the *archives départementales de la Seine-Maritime* (then still quite content to be *Inférieure*) from their rightful home, which was then given over to the police and to a tentacular Prefectoral bureaucracy.

The expelled archives ended up four kilometres north of the city in what had been the chapel of a large maternity home for unmarried mothers, offering the spectacle of a curious juxtaposition of the past and the future, while denying the large-bellied girls in their blue smocks the consolation of resident religion. The temporary *salle du travail* was established in an eighteenth century town house in the rue de Crosne, near the Vieux Marché. Research was not the only activity of the house, used by the archivist to cook fish over an open flame and to accommodate fair-haired Norwegian and Finnish sailors on shore leave. The *salle* itself provided *Boufflers*, a large and historically-minded cat of *chartiste* inclinations—he favoured monastic records—belonging to the deputy archivist, with a feline gymnasium. In order to bring papers and registers down from the maternity, a black *traction-avant* had to be cadged off the Prefecture, an operation involving complicated diplomacy.

When I was working in Laon in the 1950s, the *archives de l'Aisne* were kept in a couple of wooden huts built by the French Army during the phoney war. The abundant *archives communales* of le Havre had found a temporary refuge in the stables of the gendarmerie. In Bourg-en-Bresse, the *archives de l'Ain* were piled in dusty confusion on the floor of a former chapel. In Versailles, the records of the old Seine-et-Oise had managed to stay on in their rightful home, rue Notre-Dame, but, thanks to the kindness of the archivist, they also did a great deal of travelling between Versailles and Paris. “Take a dozen registers home with you, it will save you the railway fare”, he would say to me. One large box of loose papers burst open in the *métro*, at Javel. In Paris itself, the papers of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century *juges de paix* were still confined to the black night of a disused *métro* station, Croix-Rouge, re-emerging above ground and returning to their rightful home, quai Henri IV, only in the 1950s.

During the same period, one of the *sous-archivistes de la Seine*, a lady with strong royalist convictions, employed her working hours cutting off the letter-heading REPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE on all documents dating from the First, Second and Third Republics. By the time she was taken away to Sainte-Anne, she had thus guillotined some thousands of offending documents, removing, with the same firm *coup de ciseaux*, two or three sentences on the back. In the middle of the *salle du travail* in the records of Vaucluse, Palais des Papes, in Avignon, there was an open well, over fifty feet deep. I sometimes wondered how many unsuspecting researchers it had accounted for. After the Liberation, the French War Records were still kept at the Ministry, rue Saint Dominique, where the tiny *salle* was presided over by a charming old man, M. Bernard, with white-gloved courtesy. Later, they were moved to Vincennes. The move turned out to be highly advantageous, as a large number of minute books and muster rolls, believed to have been lost, turned up in the attics of the Ministry.

Working in such varied conditions produced its own hazards and its own compensations. On a Saturday afternoon, George Rudé and I found ourselves locked in the *minutier central* of the notarial records, Hôtel de Rohan. We eventually managed to reach ground level, rue Vieille-du-Temple, with the not altogether reassuring help of an eighteenth-century drain-pipe. I was later locked in the Police records, quai des Orfèvres, as well as in the Prefecture at Melun. On the other hand, I was given the key to the rue de Crosne, so that I could work on the Rouen records on Sundays; and, in Vincennes, one was able to help oneself to *dossiers* by going into the stacks. Although working on the revolutionary period, I used the opportunity to read the secret files of any serving officer in the French Army whose name was familiar to me; they were all there, in an alphabetical series that extended the whole length of the top floor of the Pavillon de la Reine. Even in the Archives Nationales, thanks to the indulgent eccentricity of a *garçon de salle* (who had it in for Americans, but favoured the English), it was possible to save a great deal of time by fetching one's reserved boxes from the room in which they were kept. One could categorize the 1940s and 50s, both in Paris and Vincennes, even more in the provinces, as one of self-service.

In retrospect, this would seem like a lost golden age. Rouen, Toulouse, Laon, Bourg, le Havre, Dieppe, Lille, Marseilles, Nimes, Beauvais, Versailles, Nice, Gap, Bourges, have all now been provided with ultra-modern functional buildings. And I have no doubt that this has been the pattern elsewhere, though Dijon and Lyon still retain their delightful original ones. But better buildings have, nearly everywhere, been matched by more bureaucracy, while the amiable eccentrics, many of them pensioners hobbling on uncertain legs, who, in the past, either brought one boxes or dozed while one helped oneself, have been largely replaced by disagreeable young men who make a point of penalizing the researcher by taking an eternity to fetch a box, by bringing the wrong one, and by throwing it down on one's desk.

In the Archives Nationales, at least in the *Salle du Public*, it has become almost impossible to carry out any sustained research, a situation that, in the last five years, has driven me to work at a lower level of society, in the still accommodating Archives de la Seine and Archives de la Préfecture de Police. At the same time, more bureaucracy has resulted in more paper work, elaborate slips in different colours giving space for a mini-biography of the *chercheur*, shorter opening hours and random closures designed apparently to take the unfortunate foreigner unawares.

One cannot help admiring the tenacity of Anglo-Saxon historians who, despite all, persist in attempting to research on French national history. L'École des Chartes that, in the 1930s, 40s and 50s, seems to have schooled a higher proportion of obliging *originaux* than any other educational institution, seems now to have thrown up a generation of hard-faced technocrats, steely thirty-to-forty-year-olds, of the same implacable age group as that of the new rulers of France, trained in archival work, skilled in cataloguing, in the drawing up of *inventaires*, concerned with the organization and publicity of exhibitions, and shut away in the fastnesses of their offices in some remote part of the building, rarely seen in public, and apparently bent on keeping researchers at a distance. It is as if the Bibliothèque Nationale and the Archives Nationales had reversed roles. In the 1950s, the motto of the BN (inscribed over the porch) was *dégoûter le lecteur*: in the 1980s, that of the AN has become *dégoûter le chercheur*. There are more and more records than ever, *archives privées* supplementing public ones, but, at least at the national level, they are more and more difficult to get at.

The calculated surliness of unionized *garçons*—CGT, CFTC, FO—makes for the maximum delay in the obtention of a box, likely to be the wrong one. And as archivists, at least in the AN, are above all concerned to placate the oafs who, with studied slowness, fetch the boxes, scattering them with cigarette ash, the number of boxes to be issued each day to individual readers has been steadily reduced: limitless in the 1950s, it is now down to a pitiable half-dozen. Presumably, the final aim of this implacable process of attrition is to drive away researchers altogether and to reserve the archives for much-fanfared exhibitions. Gone are Saturday afternoons; Saturday mornings will be the next to go. Impossible to order boxes on a Friday. Soon it will be on a Thursday, then, no doubt, on a Wednesday while typewritten notices, underlined in red ink, and carrying illegible signatures (one can understand the reluctance of archivists to give away their names!), threaten the wretched *chercheur* with yet another closure. *Fermeture* has become the key word in the bureaucratic vocabulary of the new-style archivist, as if *ouverture* were an act of royal favour, to be granted to the supplicant, *tenant la dragée haute*.

There are endless complaints, newspaper articles, protests in high places. But apparently nothing can be done, at least as far as the AN are concerned, for the researcher in the provinces, as well as in the APP, in Vincennes, in the Quai d'Orsay, and in the more specialized dépôts is still likely to encounter courtesy, helpfulness and even, occasionally, a lingering eccentricity reminiscent of better days. Having worked there since 1938, I used to regard the Palais Soubise as a home, a place of friendship, a coming together

of historians and *chartistes*, and a marvellous fount of gossip. But now I never set foot in the place, of which I hear running tales of woe and frustration from my unfortunate graduates. No wonder my former pupils tend to work on provincial history! The Archives Nationales are in the process of becoming as impenetrable as the vaults of the Banque de France. *L'amabilité française* is to be sought elsewhere, it has long since deserted to rue des Francs-Bourgeois and the *salle du public*, presided over by the Maréchal de Soubise, an incongruous survivor of ancien régime courtesy, unfortunately only in paint.

M. Jean Favier, the Directeur général des Archives de France, sent the following reply to the TLS on 14 November 1980. It is printed in Archivaria to provide our colleague's side of the argument and to demonstrate something of the tensions between archivists and users during periods of change. Canada is not immune from similar situations or feelings. Followers of this French case may wish to read further in the pages of the TLS for 3 October 1980:

I had not thought it necessary, at first, to reply to Professor Cobb's attacks against the *Archives nationales* of France (*TLS*, 12 September 1980). The persistency of these attacks, and the rumours that my silence is due to a lack of counter-arguments, oblige me now to intervene.

Professor Cobb is of course entitled to regret that the *Archives nationales* are not in 1980 in the same state as he used to know them on his first visit in 1938. Two figures will suffice to appreciate the evolution. In 1979, the reading-rooms of the *Archives nationales* and *Archives départementales* have received 13,000 readers, eight times more than in 1938. Altogether 1,100,000 boxes and registers have been consulted, ten times more than in 1950. Archive services cannot be held responsible for this inflation, which is mainly due to the increase of studies in quantitative and contemporary history. Obviously, archivists who have to serve yearly more than a million boxing units, i.e. about a milliard individual documents, cannot give to Professor Cobb the same familiar, confidential reception that he had, thirty years ago, from the old archivist with the historically-minded cat at Rouen.

For the same reason, archivists of the *Archives nationales* have no longer the leisure to make the courtyards of the Palais Soubise a "wonderful fount of gossip", as Professor Cobb terms it, as though gossiping were the best part of an archivist's duties.

On the other hand, it is perhaps not without significance to remark that they answered last year 7,500 letters of inquiry and made thorough archival research for 885 correspondents, the majority of whom were foreigners. None of those who received a letter of several pages giving detailed lists of documents interesting for their research has ever complained of the "technocratic" and "dehumanised" reception in the *Archives nationales*.

I created, three years ago, a new facility for researchers, with a permanent group of specialised archivists who can, on the spot, give quick and personalised information to foreigners staying in Paris for a short time. Perhaps this is more to the point than the delightful eccentrics, with or without historically-minded cats and Dutch sailors on shore-leave, whom Professor Cobb so much regrets.

We try to adapt the archives to the modern world, using, as much as we can, ADP techniques to process historical documents and to ensure the preservation of magnetic tapes and discs which are to be an essential part of the memory of our time. If we did not do that, what would Professor Cobb, a historian of modern society, think?

Now, Professor Cobb feigns to believe that we are so absorbed in modernising archives that we neglect our traditional tasks. This is, indeed, not true. In the same time as they began the ADP indexing of the *Minutier central des notaires* (nicknamed MINOTAURE: a name well designed to make Professor Cobb feel like Ariana in the Labyrinth), archivists of the *Archives nationales* published not less than 35 volumes of inventories in five years. In the whole of the Archives of France, 600 new inventories, 150 of which in printed form, have been put in use from 1975 to 1979. The four volumes of the *Etat général des fonds* of the *Archives nationales*, published from 1978 to 1980, are not a proof of the abandonment of archival tasks by a new generation of “technocratic” archivists.

As to the aid given to researchers, I do not have a feeling that, when we publish the new *Etat général des inventaires*, now on its way to completion, we forget our duties to the academic community.

May I add, as this is not devoid of significance, that in five years the number of boxes to be issued daily to each reader has been increased from three to ten (not “a pitiable half dozen”, as Professor Cobb erroneously states)?

About the main complaint of Professor Cobb, i.e., the “random closures apparently designed to take the unfortunate foreigner unawares”, I must state that he came to the *Archives nationales* in 1975, on the Friday following Ascension Thursday, which is traditionally a semi-holiday in France. Professor Cobb, who has a long experience of life in our country, surely could not ignore this tradition. However, when he was told that the reading-room has only a reduced service on that day, he was furious, left, and never came back. Now, five years later, he issues summary and surly comments. I often happened, when travelling abroad, to come up against libraries and archives closed because of local holidays. I remember having been in London during the Silver Jubilee celebrations, which were not considered as holidays in France, and I did not think of protesting because everything was closed. As a rule, I never criticise a country in which I am a guest.

In 1975, having learned that Professor Cobb was in Paris, I wrote a personal letter to assure him that I would see to it that every facility was given to him for his researches in the *Archives nationales*. Perhaps he considered this as a typical example of the disappearance of “l’amabilité française” and of the new, inhuman, technocratic approach designed to “drive away researchers altogether”. However, he never found time to answer.

Now, he chooses the occasion of an international congress of archivists to give free rein to his bad temper against French archivists in a British paper. One can wonder whether this is in the best taste.

I am glad to seize this opportunity to assure all British, and indeed all foreign, researchers that they will always be welcome in the *Archives nationales* and *départementales*, just as, I am sure, French researchers are in British record offices.