

Le Roy Ladurie's "Total History" and Archives

by TOM NESMITH

The Territory of the Historian. EMMANUEL LE ROY LADURIE. Translated from the French by Ben and Sian Reynolds. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979. xviii, 345p. ISBN 0 226 47327 9 \$15.00.

Carnival in Romans. EMMANUEL LE ROY LADURIE. Translated from the French by Mary Feeney. New York: George Braziller, 1979. xvi, 426p. ISBN 0 8076 0928 5 \$20.50.

Since the publication of his *Les Paysans de Languedoc* (Paris, 1966) Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie has been a leading exponent of the concept of "total history" pioneered by the French "*Annales*" school. His work is central to the concerns of archivists because the *Annales* group has been a formative influence on the "new" history since the end of the Second World War. For that reason alone, these two books will be required reading for anyone interested in the significance of the *Annales* variety of the new history for archival practices adopted in the heyday of an earlier historiography. Indeed, we may ask with Vital Chomel, a French archivist who worked closely with Le Roy Ladurie on *Carnival in Romans*, whether we now need "une autre archivistique pour une nouvelle histoire."¹ There will be no attempt in this review to provide the outline for a new *archivistique*; although, any archival discussion of the new history or total history will have to come to grips with the more familiar problem dealt with here: the relationship between specific perceptions of the past and the sources and research methods selected to express them.

Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre gave initial form to the *Annales* school in 1929 when they founded the journal which has since then identified the group: *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*.² Bloch and Febvre were critical of the dominant pattern of nineteenth century historical writing associated with the German "scientific" school. German "scientific" history rested upon the assumption that accurate knowledge of the past could best be obtained by critical examination of written records — a careful reconstruction from written sources of the words and deeds of the individuals who shape historical events. This approach awarded paramount importance to the literate, especially to those possessing prestige and influence enough to ensure the preservation of records they wanted kept. Research centred on the study of the elites governing the nation-states which sponsored the archives housing the documents of state. Historians wrote narrative accounts of the events of national politics, warfare and diplomacy and the careers of great statesmen.³ Bloch, on the other hand,

1 Vital Chomel, "Une autre archivistique pour une nouvelle histoire?", *La Gazette des Archives*, n.s. No. 91 (1975): 238.

2 The journal's subsequent titles have been: *Annales d'histoire sociale* (1939-41), *Mélanges d'histoire sociale* (1942-45), *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* (1946-).

3 Georg G. Iggers, *New Directions in European Historiography* (Middletown, 1975), chapter one, pp. 3-43 and George G. Iggers, "Introduction: The Transformation of Historical Studies in Historical Perspective" in Iggers and H.T. Parker, eds., *International Handbook of Historical Studies: Contemporary Research and Theory* (Westport, 1979), pp. 1-14.

insisted on “a broadened and deepened history”, one which went below politics to the fundamental causes of stability and change.⁴ He argued that the environmental, social, economic and intellectual aspects of past societies ought to be examined in ambitiously conceived syntheses.

Bloch and Febvre could not disapprove of the conceptual categories of traditional histories without also rejecting the forms conveying them. They considered the conventions of historical writing inadequate vehicles for their approaches to research. Bloch ridiculed “mere narrative, for long encumbered with legend, and for still longer preoccupied with only the most obvious events”.⁵ Bloch and Febvre opposed histories of selected individuals and ever-changing happenings constructed on the narrow documentary base of written accounts; they favoured what they believed was a true science of the past, one that concentrated on collectivities and slowly-changing conditions, was capable of learning from other sciences, especially the social sciences of geography and sociology and was supported by a vastly expanded documentary base. A desire “to penetrate beneath the mere surface of actions” led Bloch and Febvre to resist preconceived definitions of source material.⁶ Their mistrust of the subjective element in written sources convinced them that physical evidence such as architectural remains, tools, landscape and even astronomical patterns provided a degree of direct access to the past that written records did not allow.

The ambition to master a wider range of sources led followers of Bloch and Febvre to rationalize their research methods using technology and quantitative procedures. In the late 1920s Fernand Braudel, a disciple of Febvre’s, created a stir in archives in Spain and Italy by photographing thousands of documents with his own camera.⁷ Braudel’s photographs, which he read at home by the light of a magic lantern, set him on a course leading to the publication in 1949 of his classic work *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. The book’s conceptual model borrowed from Bloch and Febvre and was immensely influential in its own right. Braudel’s Mediterranean world had three dimensions. The first contained the foundations of life: the geographic, climatic, economic and demographic *structures* of societal systems whose impact persisted across centuries and national boundaries. Braudel called a short-term variation in structural patterns lasting from 10 to 50 years a *conjoncture*. Together, *structure* and *conjoncture* affected the quickly passing political, diplomatic and military events taking place on the surface of life.

The essays written by Le Roy Ladurie in the 1960s and early 1970s and brought together in the *Territory of the Historian* are soundings for the *structures* underlying French history from ancient times to the beginning of the twentieth century. Le Roy Ladurie attempts to locate demographic structures

4 Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft* (New York, 1953), p. 18. This is an English language translation of Bloch’s *Apologie pour l’histoire ou métier d’historien* (written in 1941-42; published Paris, 1945).

5 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

6 *Ibid.*

7 Fernand Braudel, “Personal Testimony”, *Journal of Modern History* 44, No. 4 (December 1972): 451-2.

in birth and death rates, biological structures in the study of famine and human physical features, economic structures in Parisian rent patterns and French agricultural production, environmental structures in the history of the climate and the structure of mental life in folklore and attitudes toward contraception and death. The range of this structural history can best be observed in his essay on "Rural Civilization" which sweeps across rural life in France and western Europe between 6000 B.C. and the early twentieth century. Le Roy Ladurie begins with his conception of the rural past:

This history is *stratigraphic*: the specific contribution it receives from every century or group of centuries, and from every millennium, is not wiped out but merely overlaid, or at worst eroded or damaged, by the contribution of subsequent centuries. One has therefore, even before it becomes possible to understand their structural arrangement, to read the sum of these contributions as if they were laid bare by a geological section — from the bottom up if one is a historian; from the top down if one is a geographer or an anthropologist.⁸

Le Roy Ladurie's history "from the bottom up" isolates persistent forces in rural history beginning with the physical and material environment: for example, the domestication of sheep around 6000 B.C., the appearance of oats and rye after 2000 B.C., the domestication of the horse (1500 B.C.), the arrival of ox and plough (1000 B.C.), vines and grafting (500 B.C.), improved plough and harness and water-mill and windmill (A.D. 500 and 1300 respectively). These natural and technical forces have been the dominant influences upon the economy, society and mentality of rural western Europe. Their primary cumulative effect was uncontrolled population growth leading to periodic subsistence crises and a chain reaction of famine, epidemic and poverty. Scarcity and natural calamity beset rural life with high mortality rates, female infertility, and late marriages which, taken together, were the preconditions of class conflict, wars, banditry, repressive taxation and popular uprisings. Le Roy Ladurie argues that this Malthusian dynamic in rural history moved in two great waves whose troughs coincided with general dislocation caused by the Black Death in the fourteenth century and a population surge between 1550 and 1600. The structural foundations of rural life did not collapse despite the severe strain imposed by overpopulation. Le Roy Ladurie maintains that restoration of balance between population levels and food production permitted the reconstruction of rural life along traditional lines.

Le Roy Ladurie's structural history draws mainly upon "serial" records or extensive series of administrative records rather than the familiar manuscripts. His major sources are not collections of personal papers but parish registers, census rolls, tithing records, tax registers, leases, harvest records and state military personnel files. Exploiting the serial source has heavily emphasised quantitative methods and forced a break from the customary narrative presentation. Le Roy Ladurie explains that "the quantifiable, the statistical and the structural" go hand-in-hand, and in French historiography especially, he notes

⁸ Le Roy Ladurie, *Territory*, pp. 79-80.

with some regret, their union “has virtually condemned to death the narrative history of events and the individual biography.”⁹ Le Roy Ladurie’s major textual sources cannot be reduced to manageable proportions until translated into statistical series. Then, like the physical evidence so highly prized as source material by Bloch and Febvre, serial records appear to offer direct access to the substrata of historical reality. For instance, Le Roy Ladurie rests the broad generalizations about the structural history of rural life on local and regional microstudies based on tithe records (used to estimate agricultural production) and parish registers (for assessing population size) which span decades, even centuries, and embrace large segments of communities. According to Le Roy Ladurie, the statistical “hard data” in these records allow a more scientific reconstruction of the past than does the study of impressions captured by one or a few individuals in written documents anchored in one time or place.

When written accounts are unavailable or silent, as they are on subjects like the causes of falling birth rates during famines in seventeenth century France, Le Roy Ladurie resorts to twentieth century medical studies of undernourished European women living in severely deprived wartime conditions to suggest that an ailment they suffered (known as amenorrhoea or sterility caused by the absence of menstruation) provides the best explanation of the phenomenon. Similarly, he draws on the research of dendrochronologists whose study of climatic patterns based on the analysis of tree-rings suggests relationships between weather, crop production and famine in fourteenth century western Europe.

Structural history’s appetite for statistical series makes the computer an essential research aid. Le Roy Ladurie believes the computer’s ability to sort previously unimagined amounts of information at high speed allows the historian to penetrate to the once hidden, subterranean structural forces shaping human life. But the new perspectives created by the varied connections the computer makes between different types of data remain as difficult to interpret as historical evidence has ever been. Le Roy Ladurie’s essay on the correlation between geographical mobility, delinquency and physical stature among French conscripts selected in 1868 for military service demonstrates some of the strengths and weaknesses of early attempts at “computer history”. The computer can store a tremendous volume of information drawn from the military files of about 12,000 conscripts. New lines of inquiry are possible; new life is breathed into these once dormant administrative records; but questions remain about what has actually been discovered. Le Roy Ladurie sometimes struggles to interpret his admittedly preliminary findings. After noting that fewer delinquents can be found among conscripts with agricultural backgrounds he suggests that “Perhaps the old sayings about rural innocence are not entirely unfounded.”¹⁰ That should be placed beside his comment on historians in the day before computers who “however eminent, . . . were prisoners of their unsophisticated methods.”¹¹

The essay on the conscripts raises other, general questions about serial history. Can we share Le Roy Ladurie’s premise that the massive amount of data

9 *Ibid.*, p. 111.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 62.

he extracts from military service files, or elsewhere from tithe records, parish registers and Parisian leases meets the heavy demands he makes on it? After countless manipulation, with and without the computer, what distortions may have crept in? Given the maddening intractability of sources the answer seems to hinge on whether sixteenth and nineteenth century records can be harnessed to twentieth century technology. Do we know enough about *how* the information they contain may be altered when translated from textual into statistical and machine-readable form? Will there be greater confidence when, in some future stage of computer development, documents expressly created by computers are used in historical research? A sceptical reviewer of traditional biography can usually check the validity of some doubtful use of the evidence by personally consulting the original documents. Unless historians using computers follow Le Roy Ladurie's advice and place their data in an archival repository the evidence for what may be controversial research will lie safely beyond reach in the researcher's personal files.

An approach to the past as ambitious, indeed as daring, as Le Roy Ladurie's is bound to present problems; yet, the breadth of vision behind it ought to leave us uncomfortable with our unexamined assumptions about what is important to know about the past and how it may be known. For Le Roy Ladurie the totality of existence is the territory of the historian; to traverse as much of it as possible by clearing as many pathways as possible is the historian's primary task; and so the varied sources charting the route must be constantly challenged to reveal more about the terrain. Historical writing in the *Annales* tradition has been strengthened by this dynamic conception of historical evidence. The *Annales* group has learned to use sources for purposes that were not intended and far from obvious. That allows Le Roy Ladurie to go beyond written sources to project modern scientific and medical findings back upon the past. It has also raised serial records like censuses, parish registers, tax rolls and personnel files from purely administrative value or genealogical fascination to a basis for the history of societal structures.

The Territory of the Historian reflects the priority given the study of natural conditions and unconscious forces by the *Annales* school. Consequently, the familiar narrative linking the conscious activity of individuals with key events is often missing. The story-teller's art is subordinate to the ability to work with a computer, reconstitute population structures, interpret statistical evidence and participate in interdisciplinary research with teams of other scholars. Periods of historical time are defined by configurations of structural forces over the "long term" rather than by the length of a political régime, a war or an individual's life. The social interpretation of history enjoys pre-eminence as a result of the stress on demographic change as a primary force in human history. "The average man, *homo historicus*", as Le Roy Ladurie calls him, occupies centre stage because population structures can only be understood when ordinary people are studied as they *are*, a condition which includes how they *behave*, but is not dependent upon any important achievements claimed for them.

History "from the bottom up" eventually reaches the level of individuals, events and ideas. The longest essay in the *Territory of the Historian* is about a

“hairy and malodorous” sixteenth century Norman seigneur Gilles de Gouberville; the Chouan uprising during the 1790s in western France is described in another essay as a rare example of an event shaping a long-term political structure; and a study of the persistence into the twentieth century of the legends associated with the medieval fairy Mélusine takes Le Roy Ladurie into the realm of popular oral tradition.

Carnival in Romans completes the ascent from the structural history dominating the *Territory of the Historian* to the study of life on the surface of the structures. In the process, the serial record relinquishes primacy to the familiar written sources. *Carnival in Romans* is very much like the usual narrative history based on a few literary sources, and Le Roy Ladurie admits as much.¹² He is mainly interested in just two weeks in the history of the southeastern French town of Romans and a dramatic event, the bloody Mardi Gras of 1580 during which the common people of the town were attacked by the upper classes in what amounts to a pre-emptive strike against a gathering revolutionary movement. Le Roy Ladurie depends on two, now published, eyewitness accounts of the Carnival, one written by the arch-enemy of the common people, Judge Antoine Guérin, and the other by Eustache Piémont, a notary whose sympathies were with the popular cause. Le Roy Ladurie not only pieces together an account of the unfolding event of Carnival from these sources but also uses their description of the festivities to assess the motivations of ordinary and basically illiterate people who left no record of their participation in the Carnival. For them, the Carnival became a vehicle for social protest, masquerade and ritual symbolized their hope for an eventual reversal of the social and economic order. That threatening symbolism brought on the repressive reaction from the town's elite led by Guérin.

If in *Carnival in Romans* Le Roy Ladurie resorts to narrative form and literary sources, his study remains within a view of French history elaborated in the essay on “Rural Civilization” in the *Territory of the Historian* and his first important book *Les Paysans de Languedoc*. He discusses the long-term structural forces shaping the region around Romans in the book on the province of Languedoc. Languedoc and Dauphiné, the adjacent province where Romans was situated, were ravaged by the “Malthusian curse” between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries. Population size grew faster than food supply until the situation reached crisis proportions in the sixteenth century. Popular revolts throughout the region were a symptom of general distress. From that perspective the Carnival throws light on the “complete geology” of sixteenth century French society; the urban Carnival allows Le Roy Ladurie to go beyond the rural crisis to examine as if “preserved in cross section, the social and intellectual strata and structures which made up a ‘très ancien régime’.”¹³

Le Roy Ladurie's work is tensed against archival structures created to serve nationalist historiography based primarily on the use of personal manuscript collections. He is ill-at-ease with what he calls “the constricting barriers of national historical studies.”¹⁴ His research focusses on local and regional

12 Le Roy Ladurie, *Carnival in Romans*, p. 367.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 370.

14 Le Roy Ladurie, *Territory*, p. 19.

societies and rests upon records in a variety of Departmental, corporate and municipal archives; his concern for standard expression for historical writing either in statistical form, the language of *structure* and *conjecture* or in openness to other disciplines shares the *Annales* emphasis on comparative studies epitomized by Braudel's *Mediterranean*. These tendencies in the new history mean that the dominance of central state archives and the private manuscript source in historical research is passing. Of course national histories will be written, but the manuscript source should no longer be expected to sustain them virtually alone. Le Roy Ladurie's work relies heavily on physical evidence, scientific and medical findings and what is becoming in effect a new primary source — computer records containing data extracted from serial sources. We need only add to this list the new significance of aural and visual sources Le Roy Ladurie could not or did not use, and the increasing importance of published material.

The archival profession is well aware of the changed environment created by the multimedia or "total archive", even if the profession is still in the early stages of adapting to its new surroundings. The current debate over the nature of the "total archive" will benefit from the realization that a commitment to "total archives" implicitly endorses a particular view of the past; it assumes the existence of a definable "total" past which can be preserved in some form. Archivists, however, have neither challenged that assumption nor acted upon it to develop a view of "total history" capable of guiding their day-to-day work. Discussion of "total archives" will profit from consideration of Le Roy Ladurie's "total history" as an integrating concept for the "total archive". Certainly his use of serial records, historical demography, quantification and the computer requires closer scrutiny from the critical archival perspective than provided here; and other approaches to "total history" which depend less on these tools need to be examined.¹⁵ Nevertheless, finding an appropriate description of the past the "total archive" exists to preserve is an aspect of our work that cannot be minimized. The introduction by Le Roy Ladurie and others of new research techniques and the extension of their interest into the regions of sexuality, crime, death and popular entertainments and disorders only increase the sense of urgency about that dimension of archival work.

It is therefore to be hoped that as the discussion of "total archives" proceeds growing numbers of Canadian archivists will find themselves in agreement with Vital Chomel when he wrote: "rouvrir le dialogue avec l'historiographie contemporaine pourrait bien constituer l'une des urgences de l'archivistique d'aujourd'hui."¹⁶

15 Theodore Zeldin, "Social History and Total History", *Journal of Social History* 10, no. 2 (Winter 1976).

16 Chomel, "Une autre archivistique", p. 239.