It is almost impossible to talk of the landed interest in France in the nineteenth century. The phrase is an English one and in France it does not apply to a readily identifiable or coherent group of people. The value of including a chapter on France in this collection of essays might therefore be to assist in the definition of the idea by showing what it is not, and by suggesting that the existence of a landed interest should not be taken for granted as natural or inevitable.

In England, the aristocracy and the gentry had for long derived most of their wealth from agriculture; and the fact that they often founded their fortunes, or increased them, or saved themselves from ruin by holding state offices or by participating in industry and trade made no difference to the identification of the ownership of large estates with political domination. In France the landowners did not win political power in the seventeenth century as they did in England; nor did a small group of people succeed in obtaining ownership of the bulk of the land. The dissolution of the monasteries in England allowed land worth as much as the king's whole income to be placed on the open market and to be bought up rapidly, mainly by the rising gentry. By the time the same sort of thing happened in France, with the confiscation of the church's lands by the Revolution of 1789, the people who had the money to buy these up were no longer landed aristocrats, but more often townsmen.

In France, again, the kings of the ancien régime had managed to hold on to political power, or at least to more political power, than their counterparts in England, and they had done this partly by playing off the middle class against the aristocracy, selling state offices to save themselves from bankruptcy. Whereas in England the landed interest was able to express itself through parliament and to use the power this gave it to consolidate its claim to speak for the nation, in France it failed to develop any organized unity, and the parlements
were assemblies of lawyers, not of landowners. However, these lawyers, of course, also owned land. That is just one of the complications that confused the French situation before the French Revolution partly dispossessed the aristocracy and so ended all possible similarities between the two countries. The landed interest in France therefore involves adding up a whole lot of ambiguities and of conflicting interests.

*Idiosyncrasies of the French Landed Interest*

In the nineteenth century the landed interest in France had no natural leaders. In England a relatively small number of families owned, between them, a considerable part of the soil: in the 1870s roughly one-half of the United Kingdom was owned by several thousand owners. In France the situation already in 1789 was that about one-third of the country was owned by the peasantry, and when the lands of the nobility and the church were put on the market, the result was that the country was divided between no less than 3,800,000 proprietors. The vast majority of these, it is true, each owned very little land. Less than half of them were able to live off the plots that belonged to them. France should not be called a country of small peasant proprietors, not at least if by this it is implied that the land was owned by the peasants and that most peasants owned some land. This was far from being the case. There were as many landless laborers and servants on the land as there were peasants who owned land; only a quarter of the agricultural population were self-sufficient farmers. Even this figure is probably an exaggeration, because among the self-sufficient farmers were a considerable—but still uncertain—number who were heavily in debt. The competition to acquire land was such that poor people put most of their savings into land and borrowed a great deal more so as to enjoy the prestige of ownership, even though this often brought increased hardship.

A vast number of statistics were accumulated by the government on landowning, but it is still impossible to say precisely how the land was distributed between large and small owners. The names of the great landowners in the country are not known in any way that can be compared with the list of landowners published in England in the 1870s. It would perhaps be possible to find out who they were, but this would involve an enormous amount of research in local archives, for almost every field was registered as a separate unit, the aim being to note how much taxation it should pay. Another approach to identify-
ing the large landowners is through the study of wills and succession documents. Here very instructive work is now being done. But until recently historians have been interested far more in the history of peasant ownership than in that of large estates. Large landowners have on the whole escaped the barbed investigations that have been carried out on every other class of capitalist bogey man. It is known, however, that they were concentrated in only some regions of France: at the end of the nineteenth century there were only twelve departments which had any farms of over 750 acres. Farms in France were classified as large if they were over 100 acres. But there is no ready way of discovering how many large farms were concentrated under the ownership of the same individuals: the statistics are about agricultural tax units more than about landowners. It is clear however that France had no one like the English or Scottish dukes. To compare with the 80,000 acres owned by the duke of Bedford, one can quote examples of estates of only about 10,000 acres, such as that owned by the due de La Rochefoucauld-Doudeauville; and the pretender to the French throne himself, the comte de Chambord, was certainly a poorer man than many an English nobleman. The richest man in France in the early nineteenth century was probably the due de Crillon, who left about ten million francs, roughly £400,000 sterling, a relatively low figure by English standards, being equivalent to an English landed estate of about 10,000 acres.

There were several other reasons, apart from the peculiar distribution of ownership, that prevented any clearly defined landed interest emerging. One was the regional variations of France. Despite the centralization imposed on the country in matters of government, regional traditions survived very strongly in rural affairs. The fact that France was politically a nation has obscured the enormous diversity of its geographical, historical, and social composition. There was almost no movement in the nineteenth century that was uniformly successful throughout the country; and in the agricultural world above all, loyalties were local. There was a considerable amount of communal cooperation, more than is usually realized—the idea that the peasant was exclusively selfish and individualistic is a myth, or at least only half the truth—but this was compensated for by bitter animosities between villages, which not infrequently manifested themselves in physical violence, usually in the form of mass fights between their young men. The sense of being a countryman, as opposed to a townsman, also certainly existed—that was another excuse young people used to have a fight—but this was a unity that manifested itself only fitfully and essentially in the context of precise local situations, that is to say,
where the inhabitants of a particular village had a tradition of despising those of a neighboring town. Usually there were too many pressures both from within rural society and from the outside world to allow the development of any collective or national peasant self-consciousness.

The rural population was also bitterly divided against itself. The distinction between landowner and landless was fundamental, and that, to begin with, divided those who lived by agriculture into two numerically almost equal classes. Then there were infinite gradations among the landowners, and every nuance in these produced keenly felt emotional reactions. Because there were so many landowners, with widely varying incomes, jealousy and rivalry diminished or eliminated any sense of belonging to an elite. The peasant whose plot was so small that he had to go to work on the local nobleman’s estate part time, in order to make ends meet, could not consider that he had much in common with the latter, even if they both figured in the statistics as landed proprietors.

The very variety of tenures and arrangements by which the French worked the soil, however, explains why, neither during the French Revolution of 1789 nor in any subsequent revolution, was there any united uprising to expel the large landowners. Too many peasants owned some land to want a general redistribution, by which they were bound to lose in favor of those who were completely landless; and too many peasants had individual arrangements with other landowners to supplement their incomes for them to be willing to risk their livelihoods in a general holocaust. Too many people had won a stake, however small, in the status quo for a land revolution to be possible.

This did not mean that the peasants were conservatives. The idea of a French landed interest standing as an obstacle in the way of progress, or of socialism, or indeed of change in general, is false. It was very far from being a static force. It is sometimes claimed that in certain backward regions, such as Brittany, there was a stable agricultural order that gave the leadership role to the nobles, that in these regions nobles exerted an influence over the rest of the population, either directly through the power they wielded over leases with their tenants and sharecroppers, or indirectly through traditional prestige when they held no such economic power. This would make the Breton nobles something like the English ones. In the nineteenth century, however, this was seldom the reality. It is true that noble landed proprietors were returned to parliament to represent Brittany with a greater regularity than is to be found in most other parts of the country, but this
should not mislead us about the extent of their influence. Brittany was a region noted not only for its large number of resident noblemen but also for the great power of the church; and in very many cases it was the backing of the church that was the decisive factor in sending a nobleman to parliament, much more than the fact that he was a landowner. This becomes even more obvious if we remember that virtually none of these noble members of parliament owned estates large enough to carry their influence beyond a very small section of their constituency.

It also used to be thought that small-scale farming produced republicanism and radicalism, while large estates and sharecropping and forest regions favored conservatism. Investigations of this generalization in a detailed way, however, particularly in the department of the Sarthe, have shown the interplay of much more complex forces. The terms of agricultural leases between landlords and tenants do not seem to have had any significant effect on the influence exerted by the former over the latter. The quality of the land, or the way it was divided up, or the type of farming pursued on it, was not direct indication of the political climate either. Specific areas appear to have passed through periods of prosperity and depression without altering their attitudes towards the social hierarchy. The really decisive factor seems to have been the nature of the competition for landownership. Where peasants were rich they could hope to buy the land; but this situation sometimes occurred in regions that were attractive to local townsmen who wished to invest in the land around them. A hostility was then set up between the peasants and the bourgeoisie, and the peasants would accept the leadership of the nobility because they saw in them allies against the bourgeoisie. This is very different from saying that they were tame upholders of traditional hierarchy.

Another factor underlying the political attitudes was the degree of isolation of a region from other forms of urban interference. Rich peasants could often do without supplementary income from such occupations as weaving or lacemaking. These and similar winter activities placed those peasants who did engage in them in close contact with the town merchants who provided the raw materials and bought the finished goods. Revolutionary ideas were thus often readily transmitted from the towns to the peasantry. This is one reason why peasants who were part-time artisans were so often radical in politics, while the isolated peasant, whose main contact with the outside world was the local church, accepted the traditional order.

It is important to stress that the division of the rural population in its political and social attitudes was not produced by wealth or
poverty as such. Brittany was poor, but that was not why it was conservative; and in any case, it ceased to be so poor as the century advanced. What mattered was how the peasants saw the outside world, whether they thought they had more to gain than to lose from cooperating with it. Bonapartism was an attempt to put the power of the state at the disposal of the peasants, with material improvements, better roads, and higher prices for market produce as the direct benefit; in return the state asked the peasants to abandon their allegiance to the nobility and the church. In many areas the peasants accepted this deal because the financial rewards were too obvious to reject. Where they did, the traditional rural hierarchy was broken up, and the power of the state, the towns, the civil servants, became the focus round which life moved in the future. The destruction of the old order was then completed by the introduction of mass education, which led the young people to emigrate to the towns to obtain jobs requiring less effort and giving more certain rewards than tilling the soil. The state in France was thus very active in spreading the influence of the towns; the state was identified with the urban middle class in a way it was not in England. This requires some explanation, for France was much more of an agricultural country than England. Why did the landed interest not enjoy a dominant position in it?

The Landed Interest and the State

During the Second Empire, the legislative body, elected by universal suffrage and therefore above all by peasants, contained only a minority of landowners. Only 19 percent of its members were primarily landowners, exercising no other profession, though many other members classified under other occupations doubtless owned some land too. In the Third Republic the situation was not much different. In 1889 about 30 percent of the members of the National Assembly were either primarily landowners or else professional or businessmen with sizable landholdings. By 1910 the proportion had fallen to 18 percent, and by 1924 to around 12 percent. Judged by the number of landowners elected, the landed interest clearly received far less representation in politics than the predominance of agriculture in the economy would seem to have warranted. In 1851, 61 percent of the nation was engaged in agriculture; and in 1891, 45 percent still was. Of course, the fact that a rural constituency is represented in parliament by a barrister, for example, does not mean that the interests of agriculture will be neglected. Nevertheless politics was certainly more of an
urban than a rural preoccupation; government was the business of
townsmen; and the proclamation of universal suffrage was not seized
on by the rural majority in order to capture command of the towns.

Here again, however, the situation which emerged was not a simple
one. The towns did rule the countryside, generally speaking; the gov-
ernments and administrators were overwhelmingly men educated in
the towns; and the principal tax was the land tax, paid above all by the
rural community. Taxes on buildings and nonagricultural income were
introduced, but it was only in the twentieth century that the income
tax was adopted to spread the burden of taxation more equitably. The
reason why this was tolerated lay again in regional rivalries. The land
tax was divided up unequally between the eighty-odd territorial de-
partments of France. Exactly how much tax an individual landowner
paid depended on where he lived. The struggle for reduced taxation
was therefore less to obtain a general reduction than to get a smaller
share allocated to one's own department. This was easier to do, be­
cause one could argue that one's department was getting poorer or
suffering from the effects of floods, emigration, disease, etc. Sectional
interests thus competed against each other. Some departments were
very successful at this game—the most successful of all being Corsica,
which, thanks to the indulgence of Napoleon and the favoritism of his
successors, paid far lower taxes than it should have done on any logical
basis.

The failure of the landed interest to make itself dominant even in
the management of local affairs may be seen also in the composition of
the conseils généraux, the elected local councils that helped to manage
the departments. These councils were never able to obtain very exten­sive
power, and the state-appointed prefect was throughout the
century—irrespective of the political regime that prevailed—the more
or less omnipotent authority at the local level. In 1840 landowners
(who were that and nothing else) formed only 28 percent of the
membership of the local councils, and in 1870 about 33 percent. Since
political programmes did not play a great part in the elections for
these councils, it is easier to see at this level what kind of considera­
tions led the peasants to vote for people who were not of their own
kind.

Wealth was one factor, and landowners were not the richest people.
At least, a list of the twenty-five richest conseils généraux in 1870
included fourteen bankers and industrialists. This list does not give the
income of the bankers Rothschild and Pereire, which the authorities
dared not even estimate but which must have placed them at the top;
but it shows that Eugene Schneider, owner of the metallurgical indus­
tries of Le Creusot, had an income of 1,500,000 francs, almost twice as much as the richest landowner, the duc de La Rochefoucauld-Doudeauville (800,000 francs). The other landowners who figure on this list also had, for the most part, important industrial or financial interests, and though no detailed studies of their families are available to confirm this, it is possible that they got most of their income from sources other than land. The marquis de Talhouet, the marquis de Vogüé, and the duc d’Audiffret Pasquier were all industrialists. The leading part played by the nobility in the iron and steel industry is well known. My own researches into the history of another of the families in this list—that of the marquis de Chasseloup-Laubat, who is listed as having an income of 300,000 francs a year, equal to that of Adolphe Fould the banker—have revealed that though he was a notable of a rural area, Marennes near La Rochelle, his landholdings were relatively small. Thus the mere ownership of land on a large scale did not ensure that a man had the right to represent his district in these local councils, as might—just—still be the case in England in the 1870s. Because of the country’s political centralization, what counted as much as anything in a candidate was his ability to obtain favors from the central government and from its representative, the prefect. Hence the large number of bankers and former civil servants who were elected.

There were, however, regional variations in the prestige that different qualifications enjoyed. Thus in Normandy and in the large-farm regions around Paris, the prosperous local farmers played a dominant role in the local councils. They shared power much less with bankers and officials, and more with Paris plutocrats who had bought up large estates and so mixed the prestige of money and land. A possible generalization is that in rich areas, such as this one, where farming was profitable and large estates prospered, the landed interest, represented by successful landowners, did win an important place in local government, while in poor regions, particularly in the south of France, professional men—bankers, doctors, notaries—were able to obtain leadership in the local councils. This generalization does not work in Brittany, however, nor in the east.

What made a man a leader in his community was much more than his wealth, the nature of his wealth, his experience in government, or his programme. The modern study of French history, as its focus shifts from the national to the regional and the local, is increasingly stressing the individuality of local units. Two landowners with identical acreages in neighboring villages may have totally different positions, according to the social and economic character of those villages.
Where a landowner lived among a considerable number of independent smallholders, able to keep themselves adequately without having much to do with him, he might well be kept permanently out of power. This was likely to be the case particularly in winegrowing villages, which were noted for their political radicalism. A large landowner employing many of the villagers, however, would be in a very different position, but then his influence could sometimes be assailed by an active mayor, backed by a government anxious to destroy traditional influences.

The role of the mayor in breaking up the coherence of the landed interest was important. The mayor, until 1884, was appointed by the government, but even after that date he was still the representative of the government, as well as being the administrator of the village. Whereas in England the justice of the peace, who was perhaps the nearest equivalent, was almost always chosen from the ruling class and in rural areas from among the major landowners, in France personal and political considerations increasingly counted for more than wealth and the ownership of land. Orleanists, Bonapartists, and Republicans successively did their best to raise up a rival against the legitimist noble in his château, who had once thought of himself as the natural leader of the village. Residence in the village was not crucial: a son of the village who was powerful in Paris was not infrequently chosen as mayor, even if he came home only in vacations; most members of parliament were mayors of villages or towns. The mayor had to be willing simultaneously to converse and argue with the administration: the legitimist nobles, when they opted out of politics, thereby lost much of their value to their communities, and that was the first step in their overthrow. Nevertheless, in the west particularly, many noble landowners continued to be accepted by the government as mayors, because there seemed to be no alternative to them: it all depended on how bold the prefect was in his estimate of his ability to challenge the rural hierarchies.

Summary and Reflections

These are some of the factors that were involved in preventing the landed interest from establishing itself as the major force in France. It was only when normal government collapsed that the rural population took on political importance, filling the vacuum as it were, but seldom for long. Thus the national assemblies of 1848 and 1871, both following revolutions, brought an unusually large number of aristocratic
landowners suddenly into positions of influence. In 1871 they were for a few years almost dominant. In 1940, again, the Pétain regime, following the country’s military defeat, revived the ideal of an agricultural France, but the ideal vanished as soon as the normal political forces recovered from the catastrophe. There was no agricultural party in the nineteenth century and none of any major importance in the twentieth century, nothing to compare with the powerful peasant parties which grew up in some other European countries.

There were not even agricultural trade unions with anything like mass support. The nobility ran a Society of French Farmers (founded in 1868) but it was too conservative, too tied to lost causes, to attract the peasants in any numbers. A rival republican Society for the Encouragement of Agriculture was set up against it, but this was the instrument of governmental favoritism and never a genuine association of peasants with any representative status. In so far as the landed interest had an organization, this manifested itself in essentially local meetings, notably of the comices agricoles. These attempted to encourage emulation and progress in agricultural methods by offering prizes and medals. Originally started in 1755, they lapsed during the Revolution, but were revived after 1830. They were assisted by small subsidies from the state but even so were only moderately successful in many areas. The chambres d’agriculture that were established by government decree about 1850 (one for each arrondissement) were mere paper institutions with no influence.

There was only a sketchy system of agricultural education, so not only were there few agriculturists with a common theoretical training but a clear gap existed between the professors of agriculture and the mass of agriculturists, who ridiculed them as impractical. Four agricultural schools were established between 1822 and 1842. A National Agronomic Institute (founded in 1849, lapsed in 1852, and revived in 1876) trained the leaders in the profession, who frequently went on to be professors of agriculture themselves. (There was supposed to be one professor in each department, to give free public lectures, but the full complement was not attained.) The surprising fact is that France established an independent ministry of agriculture only in 1881: until then land problems were a subordinate or partial interest of the ministries of the interior, commerce, or public works.

Though rural influences were largely excluded from the exercise of power, the question whether they were nevertheless powerful was
never quite clear. The townsmen complained that the rural population
was overrepresented in parliament. We have seen that this was not
true if we judge by the number of landowners elected. It was true,
however, if we judge by other criteria. All governments feared the
revolutionary activities of the towns—and until the end of the nine-
teenth century towns were nearly always left wing—and the con-
stituencies were so drawn as to reduce the number of members elected
to parliament by the towns. Thus even under the Third Republic
small arrondissements with only a few thousand electors were given
one member, while urban arrondissements with ten times as many
inhabitants also had one member. The Senate of the Republic was
similarly elected mainly by the rural communes, since every com-
mune, whatever its size, had one vote. In this way, for example, Mar-
seilles, which had nearly a million inhabitants, had only 24 votes in
electing its Senator, while the rural communes, with only a quarter of
that population, had 313 votes. Nevertheless the landed interest con-
stantly complained that it was discriminated against. Nothing emerged
more constantly from it than the lament that it was neglected. This
inferiority complex probably lies at the root of the failure of France
to produce an organized landed interest.

Farming was not an esteemed occupation, or at least it was esteemed
only in romantic poetry. The pastoral idyll was praised, but only by
people who preferred to keep well clear of the land themselves. The
physiocrats may have argued that the land was the main source of
wealth, but in the nineteenth century nobody believed them. Land
was very highly valued as an investment; but this was not for financial
profit but for relaxation and retirement, for social more than economic
reasons. Almost everybody's ambition was to be a landowner, but a
small piece of land was usually enough. The price of land was so high
that the yield from it was very much lower than what could be
obtained by any other form of investment, even state bonds—and it
was preferably to state bonds (the rente) that people looked for in-
come. There were thus two categories: le propriétaire and le rentier.
To be a propriétaire did not necessarily mean that one lived off one's
property; the man who lived off a private income called himself rather
a rentier. The state, rather than the land, was the real guarantor of
independence—a fundamental difference from England.

Farming was considered, at least in the early nineteenth century,
"the exclusive preserve of the least well to do and the least enlightened
portion of the population.” Mathieu de Dombasle (1777–1843) was considered an eccentric when he took up farming himself, to prove that agriculture was a career in no way inferior to industry or government service and that it could, if carried on scientifically, produce equal profits. When the revolution of 1830 deprived the aristocracy of state offices, many aristocrats turned to agriculture, and a new interest in farming developed. How many did this is not yet established, but the impression one gets is that it was only a minority who thought that Dombasle was right; most aristocrats probably sought to remake their fortunes in town-based occupations.

The major exception to this was in the north and Paris regions, where large-scale farming prospered on quasi-industrial lines. Because these successful agriculturists came from only one part of France, however, they were unable to become the leaders of a nationwide rural movement; their success only accentuated their difference from the mass of smallholders of the south and center, who were peasants surviving in the traditional way. What developed in the course of the nineteenth century was therefore not a united landed interest but a series of interest groups—like winegrowers and market gardeners—which not only had difficulty in seeing any common interest among themselves but also were often divided internally by regional, religious, and political rivalries. Almost every organization in France in this period was inevitably split on ideological lines, even if these had little to do with the aims of the organization.

The economics of landownership is a neglected field in French nineteenth-century history. There has been quite a lot written on the question of tariff protection, but this has been largely political or legal in character, and landownership as such has attracted very little attention, at least in the postrevolutionary period. There is, for example, nothing to compare with the work that Professors Spring and Thompson have done on England. How French landowners managed their estates still awaits investigation. The gap is due partly to the reluctance of Frenchmen to open their archives to historians, but attitudes in this matter have been changing fast in the last decade. This article will perhaps have served some purpose if it stimulates students to undertake research in what is an almost virgin field.
NOTES

1. Aisne, Bouche-du-Rhône, Cher, Corse, Côte-d’Or, Gironde, Indre, Landes, Loir-et-Cher, Loiret, Nièvre, and Var.
3. Anonymous, Quelques notes sur M. de Dombasle et sur l’influence qu’il a exercé (Nancy, 1856).
4. Madame Brigette Jeannerey-Joseph’s recent mémoire on the estates of the marquis d’Andelarre (unpublished, copy in the Sorbonne library) is a pioneering and very instructive work.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

There are two valuable bibliographies which anyone wishing to pursue this subject needs to begin with: Michel Angé-Laribe, Répertoire bibliographique d’économie rurale (1953), published as an offprint by the Bulletin de la Société française d’Économie rurale, which contains over 2,700 references, and Henri Mendras, Sociologie rurale (1962) with some 500 annotated recommendations for reading well beyond the strict limits of sociology. The numerous works of these two specialists are the best starting point for any study. Theodore Zeldin, France 1848–1945, vol. 1. Ambition, Love and Politics (Oxford, 1973) may be found useful for placing the landed interest in its context; it also contains about 2,000 bibliographical footnotes, both to original sources and to the latest monographs. Amongst the latter, special mention should be made of: A. J. Tudesq, Les grands notables en France 1840–9 (1964) and idem, Les conseillers généraux en France au temps de Guizot (1967); A. Girard, A. Prost, and R. Gossez, Les conseillers généraux en 1870 (1967); P. Vigier, Essai sur la répartition de la propriété foncière dans la région alpine (1963); Henri Elhai, Recherches sur la propriété foncière des citadins en Haute Normandie (1965); P. Barral, Les agrariens français de Mélène à Pisani (1968); L. Wylie, Chaneaux, A Village in Anjou (Cambridge, Mass., 1966); Paul Bois, Paysans de l’Ouest: Des structures économiques et sociales aux options politiques depuis l’époque révolutionnaire dans la Sarthe (Le Mans, 1960); and Suzanne Berger, Peasants against Politics: Rural Organisation in Brittany 1911–67 (1972). The works of Adeline Daumard, though they are basically about towns, are a valuable statistical source for the relations of town and country. These works, between them, should enable the student to discover what is available and what is being done in this field; but they will also show him that there is plenty of scope for further research. The landed interest, the nobility and the peasantry, have been as neglected for the nineteenth century as they have been favored for the eighteenth.