Conclusion

As members of the same body, there is a consequence: all nobles carry a certain responsibility for the conduct of each other, as happens in a family; the fault of an individual alone does not render them all guilty, but all are obliged to make a certain reparation.

—Grimouard de Saint-Laurent, Questions sur la noblesse

Noble family conventions derived from a preindustrial, prebourgeois past which was opposite—and at least to that extent opposed—to the new urban, egalitarian society, with its promise of plenty and democracy, that was emerging slowly and unevenly in nineteenth-century Europe.¹ The 1789 Revolution accentuated in the short run the economic and agricultural backwardness of France compared with England, but simultaneously it broadcast throughout the world liberal, Jacobin, socialist, and dirigiste ideologies. As everybody knows, France was a political exemplar, not to say a nightmare, to her neighbors at that time. Recent French history became as familiar to European intellectuals as the classical past which they were obliged to study in their secondary schools.

Nobles were leading contenders in that narrative, but they lacked unity, and they did not obey the same political strategies. In the main the noblesse had been opportunist under Napoleon, with a significant number rallying to some form of state service, usually on the local level. Even under the Restoration a handful of the old noblesse retained loyalty to the Bonapartist cause, such as the marquis de Las Cases and Montholon, both of whom accompanied Napoleon to Saint Helena. The imperial nobility, of military origin, took an understandable pride in their origin, exemplified by Junot’s motto to the effect that he was the ancestor, not his forebears. In due course other nobles became keen partisans of the Orleanists. Too much ink has flowed in describing the different currents of opinion among the nobles without emphasizing...
the social values held in common which transcended the search for advantage in political affiliations. In this book I have attempted to portray something of the social landscape of nobles in France. Their economic strategy, their relationship to power, the extent of their influence, and above all, the importance to them of family ties were fundamental to that reality.

For their part those men and women would have been impatient with so bald a claim. In their eyes nobility was based on personal distinction and ancestral tradition; quite literally this refinement was inexplicable to those who did not partake of the je ne sais quoi. Nothing damaged their intricate psychological constructs more than crude factual examination of the conventions that marked them as patricians. Madame de La Tour du Pin was content in her memoirs to tell posterity that Napoleon I immediately recognized in the simplicity and good cut of her outfit the style, taste, and deportment of an aristocrat of the old court; to her it would be otiose to explain why too many expensive diamonds or elaborate dress were a mistake. She and her husband had retained the wealth, the contacts with their ilk, and the confidence in their innate abilities to gain for him highly responsible posts under Bonaparte and the Bourbons. Aristocrats and petty noblesse believed that nobles had an instinctive habit of authority. Nobles felt it unseemly to enquire too closely into those matters. To describe their wealth, contacts, professions, and so forth makes for a less awesome and more untidy subject than an examination of noble dreams of inborn superiority.

If nobles thought they were the polished summit of good society, they knew they were no longer the rulers of France. No misconception about nobles has been more sedulously cultivated in republican textbooks than the claim that nobles had learned nothing and forgotten nothing since 1789. In fact, nobles very quickly learned the distinction between public and private realms of power and social influence when the noblesse became a victimized minority during the Revolution. By 1800, nobles could see that they were far from being the public superiors of the notables; on the contrary, they were dependent upon them if the new France was to prove remotely to their taste. What they hoped to preserve in the private sphere was a way of life and its attendant comforting mythologies.

However, like their tormentors during the Revolution, those "anciennes factions révolutionnaires" of whom Talleyrand observed to Louis xviii in 1815 that they were now tied to the monarchical system by titles and property, nobles found that their kinfolk's interests compelled cooperation with, and a transfer of their values to, the new rulers of France. Not surprisingly, nobles could hardly trumpet this truth about—indeed, perhaps they could not themselves see it—since the
ambiguity between their public and private stances was at the heart of their mystique of distinction. If they said that they were on an even footing with notables, they were diminished as nobles, but if they exulted in superiority, they risked antagonizing those whose tacit acceptance was essential.

Nobles wanted to retain the complicity with relations that lay behind hierarchical views of society proper to a preindustrial and prebourgeois world. On the occasion of an 1829 marriage one noble of petty territorial noblesse from the Midi wrote to another who was disheartened by Parisian politics and of the same mind: “If there is still for us any happiness, it must not be sought anywhere save in domestic joys, and I know you well enough to know that you have always been very aware of it, even when the highest interests absorbed your entire attention and filled your every moment.”

Vicomte de Bonald was here putting into words to comte de Villele the idea of the noble family shut in upon itself and its ancestral virtues as the source of their identity and worth.

Even if nobles had wished to oppose the post-Revolutionary society, they lacked any satisfactory political organization. The last nationwide assembly of the noblesse had been held at Versailles in May 1789, and to recall it conjured up memories of injurious animosities, repeated calamities, wrangling, and envy. There would not again be a national association of nobles until the Journal officiel of 22 November 1932 announced the establishment of the Association d’entraide de la noblesse française. Between those two dates the nobility had no recognized forum or national leadership. Indeed, the provincial noblesse had outdone themselves in vituperating the Chamber of Peers of the constitutional monarchies as being in the hands of aristocrats and titrés and as being unrepresentative of the antique noblesse of the kingdom, although no other body was better placed to defend their interests. Despite the overrepresentation of nobles in the upper chamber, under the Second Empire its membership was also derided as venal and time-serving, so that the Senate also could not serve as a rallying point for the concatenation of the titled.

With declining numbers, nobles never controlled any national government in their collective interest save perhaps briefly during the Villele ministry. That is not to say that they were absent from the exercise of political power; the most cursory survey of nineteenth-century political history leaves no doubt that titled politicians appeared in authority at all levels of government, bureaucracy, and administration. The success of that adjustment was still evident in the 1970s, when a study of the post–World War II French ruling class found that if nobles constituted no more than 0.3 percent of the active population, they constituted up to 9 percent of the elite, with, moreover, a marked presence in the limited
and inaccessible posts with the most power. The practice of success, as much as anything else, was the hallmark of nobles.

The central fact about the nobility between 1800 and 1870 was its fall in numbers. None of the rulers of the century gave out new titles fast enough to reverse the trend. The cost of the entailments required by Napoleon on the property of individuals who wished to pass on a hereditary title to their eldest son was restricting and applicable only to wealthy individuals. In 1834 the duc de Bassano pointed out that under the First Empire new creations had averaged thirty-six each year but had fallen under the Restoration to an average of seventeen annually, and since 1830 there had been only two.

If the state failed to make enough new titles to offset the extinction of the older ones, social practice might do so, particularly the commercial genealogies: “It is with the aim of preventing the usurpation of Noble Titles that this book is published annually which indicates the true Nobles, and appearing annually is destined to follow up the _Etrennes à la noblesse_ and the _Etat de la noblesse_ published by La Chenaye-Desbois.” That 1848 almanac gave the address where proofs of nobility were to be sent by those who wished to appear in the next issue: the editor’s address was place de la Bourse, Paris. A listing in one of the various genealogies constituted a legitimation of sorts when the central government was indifferent to policing such claims, but that facility did not end the demographic hemorrhage.

A few among the noblesse called for recruits, such as one who signed himself “a village mayor” as he made the argument in 1861 that individuals who before the Revolution had been mere écuyers or chevaliers, both obsolete titles in contemporary usage, should henceforth be called barons and vicomtes: “Alas, one knows with what speed noble families are dying out. . . . Look around us, examine among our relatives and friends, how many noble families are on the point of extinction: the number is truly horrifying. How many have we seen disappear in the last half-century!” However, neither the creation of new titles, genealogical laxities, nor greater permissiveness among nobles about the use of titles could reverse the steady shrinkage of their group.

The idea that nobles constituted “a graceful ornament to the civil order,” as Burke had put it, became widely acceptable to the wealthiest commoners. Rancor against nobles had flared up at different times in the French past, but deference and admiration for their way of life and bearing was much more normal. Echoes of the Revolutionary campaign against the noblesse were found in the anti-noble books and articles of the Restoration liberal press; however, the balance was definitely shifting. In the early nineteenth century noble idylls of aristocratic flavor gained enormously in literary esteem. The dandy was one form of this,
the epitome of the romantics for studied artificiality and rarified sensibilities derived from wealth, leisure, and upbringing. Authors like Stendhal, Barbery d'Aurevilly, Balzac, Sandeau, and Cousin gave an aesthetic evocation of nobles in their novels and biographies. So too did innumerable serial novels, inexpensive lithographs, fashion plates, vaudevilles, perfume labels, and restaurant menus. The vehement republican attack on noble pretension under the Second and Third republics was fueled by frustration that in the formal works of artists and writers the cultural ambiance of the middle classes did not offer a compelling alternative to noble attitudes. There always existed a simultaneous “dark” literature about nobles which reached a peak with the 1890s novel *Jacquou le Croquant*, but even in that text there are sympathetic characters drawn from the old noblesse as well as from the hateful recent recruits to nobility.

Nobles themselves had little to do with shifting attitudes towards them. They were beneficiaries of the general distaste for egalitarianism in a nation where the bourgeois usually emphasized his distance from peasants and workers. Throughout French society the clear limits on the Revolutionary message of liberty and fraternity were found in the persistent search for hierarchy and formalism. This was self-evident enough in the Napoleonic prefectures, where lists of provincial notables were compiled: the “influence” and “consideration” of each individual was noted. Under all regimes to 1870 there was a recognition of the Old Regime idea of natural deference and respect for hierarchy in society. Distinguished families were more important than individuals in maintaining the fabric of society. Napoleon wanted his young officials to display the kind of tone and bearing suitable to those placed in authority when he admitted junior members of the Council of State to the imperial court: “The intention of His Majesty is that the auditeurs should be admitted to the Court so that on the one hand they become accustomed to their work but on the other they will acquire the urbanity, the bon ton, and worldly assurance that are necessary in the posts to which they may be named.” The author who recalled this text pointed out how wealth and bearing of officials constantly concerned recruiters to the bureaucracy’s higher echelons throughout nineteenth-century France.

The ambitions of all noble families were cruelly dependent on wealth which permitted them to maintain a way of life. While modern historians have tried to know when, and in what circumstances, nobles were “financially outgunned by industrialists or financiers,” as one recent essay put it, we must appreciate that their prestige and standing rested on more than a substantial income. Like the bulk of big fortunes in early nineteenth-century France, noble wealth was based on land-ownership. As agriculturalists, nobles were not perceptibly different
from untitled neighbors on the land, unless in that they were less likely
to be resident. As Cobban noted, they were part of the dominant class of
landed proprietors, always united against those with little or no
property, although I have argued in this book that the shared sense of
noble identity went far beyond the unity of “the wealth and values of
landowners.”

There were differences between the bigger, more efficient estates of
northwestern France and the smaller, more arid and less fertile farms
often found in the south. Living below the Loire generally meant that
even a frugal noble lifestyle took too much out of annual profits to
permit the reinvestment in agriculture at a sufficiently high level to
match the advances of productivity in the more fertile parts of France.
Nobles in agricultural societies or on the advisory panels of model farms
obscure the fact that the 1846–48 crisis and the big structural changes
in French agriculture resulting from improved transports and new mar­
kets, as well as better crop varieties, tended towards the consolidation of
the larger, profitable estates that underpinned the wealthy aristocratic
families of the Belle Epoque.

Nobles have too often been seen as holding unchanging political and
economic attitudes. That was as true in the period 1800–1870 as it was
in the twentieth century. Considered in the mass, nobles were oppor­
tunists in their political conduct, despite the grandiose rhetoric of their
symbolic universe of excellence. Young Gobineau quickly saw that
fatuity of “the dear party,” as he ironically dubbed the ineffectual Le­
gitimists of the 1840s. Indeed, a modern study of the Chamber of Depu­
ties in 1837–39 revealed that the Legitimist representatives were more
likely to be silent and inactive in parliamentary work than almost any
other political group. After 1830 shrewd prefects realized what their
predecessors had come to appreciate during the days of the em­
peror Napoleon. Legitimist ceremonials of the “orthodox” noblesse,
from anniversary Masses for the death of Louis xvi, pilgrimages to
Belgrave Square in London to salute the pretender to the throne, or ges­
tures or disdain for the Orleanist dynasty, could be characterized as self­satisfying politics, a pleasure indulged without any risk of social conse­
quences.

As the Second Empire replaced the July Monarchy and the years
passed, the gap between this family mythology and the real place in
French society of those who called themselves noble became in­
creasingly obvious. The public debate of the 1820s over the supposed
menace posed to the political order by nobles had generated real heat,
but by the 1860s it was derisory to believe that a lackluster clientele of
tenants, grateful beggars, valets, housemaids, and deferential shop­
keepers constituted an effective power base. When, as a result of war
and political upheaval, electoral politics offered an apparent chance to
govern in the 1870s, the nobles involved deliberately, if not knowingly,
sabotaged the encounter with reality.\textsuperscript{16}

Ultimately the study of nineteenth-century nobles and their tangled
pursuit of wealth, politics, and career points us towards a particular
ideology of the family. Nobles simply willed their collective difference
from the bourgeoisie, and that was as important as the numbers of
children born or the incidence of unmarried relatives, in which they
indeed differed from the notables. They also preserved discipline and
formalism. Above all, they inculcated in their progeny the importance of
visualizing their world as a network of families rather than of indi­
viduals. Egalitarianism and individual accomplishment could never
outweigh a society based on distinguished families that preserved the
values of the past. As Hauteville wrote in 1863, “It is said that there is
nothing left to it [the nobility] save its memories: that is enough, and we
have no need to ask anything else. With this last appanage it will play a
more honorable role than when it had the preponderant voice in the
council of kings and rendered justice to its vassals.”\textsuperscript{17}

The 1789 Revolution had denied the nobles’ legal right to preemi­
nence in civil society. Recent history was retold with increasing obses­
sion by a generation that knew the decade of the 1790s only at second
hand. Christian imagery, with its emphasis on sacrifice and victimiza­
tion leading to an assurance of salvation, was congenial in the extreme.
(This lachrymose and self-indulgent view of themselves as victims at a
time when nobles were the wealthiest per capita group in nineteenth­
century France induced irritated responses from egalitarian jour­
nalists.) This blend of history, religiosity, and genealogy became highly
stylized and swollen with rhetorical embellishments and itself merits
study by semioticians. Comtesse de Champagne described her dead
husband in this kind of language: “With a sometimes severe look, M. de
Champagne had a perfect heart, good, lenient to all the faults of others,
very loved by his farmers and the poor, to whom he gave a lot.”\textsuperscript{18}
Pris­
oners as much as inventors of their mythologies, nobles recited what
they found psychologically satisfying. Paradoxically, the inability to fit
the ideal and the real permitted them to retain prestige as they kept their
position as the richest large category of French society before 1870. The
proclaimed differences from others, the industrious vituperation of the
bourgeoisie, the denial of egalitarianism, and the veneration of minority
refinements were strongest among nobles.

Regardless of the recognition accorded or denied by the larger society,
the use of titles underlined the nobles’ otherness from fellow
Frenchmen. It would be rash indeed to see love of hierarchy and rank as
particularly Gallic when it was equally prominent in other European
states, but the “formal” French retained as the touchstone of judgments on sociability, politics, and taste the values of their nobles. Indeed, in the closing decades of the twentieth century the continuing popular fascination with the imagery of noble family life and loyalties seems to be on the increase in a world of broken marriages and isolated individuals who live outside the constraints of any sort of tradition. A good example was Jean d’Ormesson’s 1974 novel about a fictional lineage whose château, Plessiz-les-Vaudreuil, was demolished to make way for the Charles de Gaulle Airport. 19 A television serial based on the story was un tube, a huge popular success.

In this book I have shown something of the transition of nobles from a feared minority to the guardians of an idealized way of life which took place between 1800 and 1870. Nobles had confronted the nineteenth century stripped of legal privileges and with a variety of unfortunate fellows actually despoiled, but their keenest weapon to ensure collective survival remained unblunted: the determination to resist absorption into the mass of the nation by maintaining a family ethic of stigma and otherness. Recent studies of the diverse forms of social power in nineteenth-century France have taken us far beyond the traditional realms of male politicians and warriors who decided the national destiny. Local elites have been scrutinized, although not enough, along with businessmen and other professionals, priests, intellectuals, and the burgeoning information industry as democratic systems of voting waxed.

There is a growing scholarly concern for the past of women and of racial, sexual, and cultural minorities whose tentative sense of worth and history was denigrated or denied in other times. Nobles after 1800 evoked an earlier supremacy, but they also had to strike a modus vivendi with their real or imagined enemies.

The combination of the wealth of the richest large social category in France from 1800 to 1870 with their uncontested ownership of the taxonomies of excellence and status for the rich delivered into their hands a remarkable authority. It is a power not to be shrugged off too lightly. 20 Many historians have dismissed nineteenth-century nobles as no more than social fossils, a declining world of “society” lightweights with anachronistic pretensions troubled by inextricable jealousies, no more than a quaint residue of the Old Regime. A. J. P. Taylor wrote of one enumeration of prominent French nobles at the end of the nineteenth century that they were “not men of political stature. They sound rather like an array of rich cream cakes.” 21

However, to trivialize and dismiss nobles is to overlook a fundamental ingredient of nineteenth-century culture. Nobles in France won a victory over the egalitarian message of the French Revolution when their conceptions of behavior captured the hearts of the most influential part
of the national elite. The failure of their opponents to formulate a plausi-
ble new symbolism of power—or, if preferred, the ability of nobles to
make accommodations sufficient to retain a distinct sphere of social
authority without being forced into the bourgeoisie—was a triumph for
all nobles in the long century that only died in World War I. French
nineteenth-century nobles had kept the covenant with their forerun-
ners, if not always their forefathers, when they maintained a world safe
for their kind.