Nobles in Nineteenth-Century France

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Note on Sources

Historical sources for studying a group as variegated as nineteenth-century French nobles are almost innumerable. A list of all books, magazines, journals, pictures, poems, and manuscript collections dealing with them in some way would constitute a text far longer than this study, as Gaston Saffroy’s *Bibliographie généalogique, heraldique et nobiliaire de la France* (3 vols. [Paris, 1968–70]) makes plain. Other sources at least touch upon the place of nobles or nobility in France. The present note points out some types of materials consulted in writing this book that could be used to extend its findings.

The most valuable single reference work for nineteenth-century titles is the massive compilation by vicomte Albert de Révérend of grants of titles and ennoblements by governments. Republished (1974) by the Librairie Honoré Champion in Paris, the collection unfortunately lacks a general index which would facilitate consultation and cross references in all six volumes. In his 1894 volumes on the First Empire, Révérend complained of poor cooperation from the descendants of the *tirés* to whom he had mailed questionnaires. He also lamented the difficulty of getting access to bureaucratic archives. He provides fuller notices for the *tirés* of the Restoration and sometimes corrects earlier entries, as in the case of that dealing with Reiset. For the mid-century nobility closer in time to his milieu he was more exacting about family composition and professions. He omitted July Monarchy peers named after the abolition of heredity in 1830, since the Chamber of Peers “ne représentait que des éléments auxquels la noblesse n’était plus attachée,” leaving Orleanist creations like Victor Cousin beyond the pale.

Equally fundamental are the various regional genealogies, such as the incomplete work of Jules Vilain, *La France moderne; grand dictionnaire généalogique, historique et biographique, Haute-Garonne et Ariège*, 3 vols. (Montpellier, 1911–13), 3, pts. 1 and 2. Some of these reference works were reprinted in the 1970s. Apart from the percentage of errors inevitable in any compilation, there are different levels of accuracy or bias. Nevertheless, genealogies, particularly those produced by nobles, provide a valuable census “from within” concerning a time when the French state took no official cognizance of
the numbers of the former noblesse. For this book, where nobility is considered as volitional, commercial “vanity” genealogies are especially useful.

At the Archives Nationales de France are found the records of entailments (majorats) and later grants of titles, 1815–35. These entailments were registered by letters patent. The official body that registered honorific titles underwent a variety of changes from the First Empire to the Second. It was called, successively,

1 March 1808  Council of the Seals of Titles
15 July 1814  Commission of the Seals of Titles
1815 (Hundred Days)  Council of the Seals of Titles
1815  Commission of the Seals of Titles
31 October 1830
1830  Council of Administration before the Keeper of the Seals (suppressed 1835)
8 January 1859  Council of the Seals of Titles (suppressed 1872)

The composition of the commissions is given by Nicolas Batjin. Initially, three senators, two conseillers d’état, one procureur général, and a secrétaire général met on Mondays and Thursdays under the direction of the archichancelier, Cambacérès. During the Restoration more legal skill was required. The Second Empire had three senators, two members of the Cour de cassation, two conseillers d’état, three maîtres des requêtes, one commissaire imperial, and one secrétaire, with a justice minister presiding. The decree of 10 January 1872 suppressed the commission and transferred attributions to an administrative council of the Ministry of Justice. Registres du sceau are classified at the Archives Nationales under BB12, BB29, and in extenso in the series BB30 965–1120.

On y trouve un ensemble de dossiers, i.e., constitutions de majorats, pour la période 1808–30 et des pièces relatives à des anoblissements, des changements de noms, des concessions de titres ... le tout formant un complément des articles cotés BB30625 à 724 dans la première partie de la sous-série. (From the note préliminaire of the inventaire at the Archives Nationales)

The documentation brought together for majorats between 1808 and 1835 is summarized in three registers, with the cote BB29782–84, containing the requests for the setting up of a majorat with the titles marquis, comte, vicomte, and baron. BB29785 deals with requests to set up the title chevalier. From this documentation it is possible to see who the aspirants for noble status were. Similar information is to be found in a summary form in the registers of the Direction des affaires civiles et du sceau relatifs aux titres: Collations, confirmations, transmissions: 1808–1870, available on microfilm at the Archives Nationales in the series 149 mi 1–38, as listed in the 1968 Etat des microfilms (repertoire available at the Service Photographique of the Archives Nationales, 87, rue Vieille du Temple, Paris). Cartons AB xix 2644–83, deposited at the
Archives Nationales in 1929, deal mainly with the period 1860–90. AB xix 2684 is a table. Much information is available in nineteenth-century *papiers privés* classified with the cotes AB xix 2644–84. These documents are listed in a manuscript repertoire kept at the Salle des Inventaires of the Archives Nationales which includes a name index, a summary description of each dossier in the cartons, and its dates. Letters patent of the First Empire are found in the series CC.

Besides these documents concerned with the establishment of titles in nineteenth-century France, administrative documents dealing with the departments (F1c–III), as well as records of other branches of government service and police, offer a wide range of information. The departments with the top quintile of the number of noble voters in the electorate (i.e., 240–300) in the 1830s were Calvados, Haute-Garonne, Hérault, Ille-et-Vilaine, Loire-Inférieure, Loiret, Maine-et-Loire, Pas-de-Calais, Orne, Seine, Seine-Inférieure, Seine-et-Oise, and Somme.

French nobles are listed on electoral rolls. The first series of these, of great interest, are the lists of notables of the year XII, recently analyzed by Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, Louis Bergeron, and Robert Forster, which are being published in *part for each department with additional biographical information*. Although titles of pre-Revolutionary nobles not decorated by the Empire were deliberately omitted, the lists of *notabilité* do show the survival of important families in the departments.

Found in departmental archives, electoral lists of the constitutional monarchies doubtless derived from the *notabilité* lists and those of the six hundred highest taxed in each department. The electoral lists reached a high standard of accuracy by the 1820s. Thomas Beck has assembled a data bank from electoral rolls of the 1840s primarily, as he details in “A Data Bank: France, 1800–1847.” *Social Science History* 4, no. 3 (Summer 1980): 347–56, and he very generously furnished me with a list of his statistics, by department, further broken down under other headings. I have supplemented this overview with samples of earlier lists. Many departments have incomplete series, and others lack them altogether. In the course of my research I have found departments like the Basses-Pyrénées, Ariège, Sarthe, or Yonne, where only fragmentary or random remnants of the lists can be found, while others, such as Maine-et-Loire and Haute-Garonne, have remarkably full collections. Supplementary or replacement information can be gleaned from jury lists (compiled from the same matrices), the municipal electoral lists of the July Monarchy, and local almanacs.

The financial information given on these lists is the reason for much of their historical importance. At the same time, many individuals clearly declared only enough taxes paid necessary to justify the right to vote or to stand as deputy. Another limitation on the use of the lists was the unequal rates of the *foncière*, the tax on the land, paid in different departments. These inequities were the subject of polemics under the Restoration. Unweighted statistics do not accurately reflect the same amount of revenue everywhere in France (see appendix 1). Another aspect of these lists that limits their value in providing a view of the wealth of the elite was their restriction to voting males of the legal age categories. Noblewomen generally outlived their husbands and often had dotal proper-
ty in their own name. Grosbois found in his study of *mutation par décès* entries of nobles in the Sarthe department between 1825 and 1834 deaths of six noblewomen whose fortunes totaled 1,710,500F. Three of them, according to the cadastral matrices of their communes, had landholdings of 2,335 hectares or 28 *métairies* and 2 mills. Such wealth often was not represented on the electoral lists.

The registers of *mutations par décès* provide a better overview of society’s wealth, since throughout the nineteenth century each individual death was the occasion, within six months of decease, of an entry in the *enregistrement* registers. The problems of dealing with an immense volume of documentation that has been preserved in very large measure are obvious. They have been discussed in detail by Adeline Daumard in two recent studies. Despite problems, they yield knowledge of local nobles, as in the remarkable *maîtrise* by M. Grosbois on the Sarthe.

The study of noble landholding can be seen in a summary way either in the amount of land tax paid on electoral rolls or, if all the necessary *renvois* are followed up, in the *mutations par décès*. Only extensive exploitation of cadastral records corroborated by estate records, when they exist, gives a more precise picture. That involves the use of the *tables d’acquéreurs* and the *tables des locations des baux*. Needless to say, this would require large-scale *travail en équipe* to be feasible.

Insights into noble marriage patterns and family relations can be gleaned from the *tables des contrats de mariage*, which may also lead on to the full text of the contract in a notarial étude. From the study of addresses, the use of titles in witnesses’ signatures (which was customary in the nineteenth century), the residences, and other information about kinship and acquaintances is informative about noble weddings.

**MINUTIER CENTRAL DES NOTAIRES DE PARIS**

The Minutier Central, located in the Archives Nationales, is an inexhaustible source for French history of the nineteenth century of which some random use was made. I used intensively the records from 1800–1870 of one notarial office’s archives, that of the two Trutats, father and son, who were succeeded in the same étude by the two Fourchy, father and son. This fashionable office was located on the left bank of the Seine on the quai Malaquais, no. 5. I examined one hundred liasses as follows: LVIII 597(\textit{bis}), 636–52, 731, 739, 750–60, 765–83, 801–24, 842–64, 880–87.