PEASANT REVOLT

Drew Sees A Modern ‘Jacquerie’

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While doing research in Europe over the summer, Mrs. Drew, of the Rice history department, witnessed an agrarian revolt. Her story, printed below, was one which we thought was interesting.

My visit to Europe this past summer was an interesting one which offered some unexpected surprises. My main goal was to explore the southeastern part of France, especially the area lying between Vienne to the south and Dijon to the north, where Burgundian influence was concentrated. I hoped to learn something about the distribution of land and agrarian conditions in the fifth century A.D., but in the process I was forced to recognize certain agrarian conditions in the Twentieth Century.

ONE OF THE most serious offenses in medieval law was to block a public road—this was a breach of the “king’s peace” —and the penalties assessed against anyone guilty of this offense were among the heaviest in the early European law codes. It came as something of a revelation to find that Twentieth Century farmers were less impressed by this prohibition than their medieval forbears, and that French peasants were blockading the roads with impunity in June, 1961.

As we made our way rapidly across central France through the Loire Valley to the upper Rhone Valley, we had noticed newspaper reports to the effect that the farmers of Brittany were in revolt against the government because of the low price offered for their main crop, potatoes. Peasant wrath had manifested itself by blocking railway tracks and barricking the main highways of Brittany.

FOR THE MOMENT the problem had struck us as an academic one and, although sympathetic with the plight of the farmers who really did have a legitimate complaint that high food prices in France did not benefit the farmers, we were conscious only of some relief that the outbreak had occurred after we had already left Brittany.

One morning while working in Grenoble, however, we awoke to hear a considerable commotion outside our window. Upon looking out, we saw a number of farmers riding their tractors into town. Their object, as it proved, was to barricade all of the banks in town, this being a protest against government policies which did not allow the banks to make “cheap loans” to the farmers. The bank barricades lasted only a couple of hours that morning; afterwards, the farmers participated in a tractor parade. One tractor carried a placard, “End of Slavery”; another carried a dummy of Prime Minister Dubree hung in effigy.

AS THE REVOLT spread throughout the lower part of the Rhone Valley, it came to include viticulturists as well as dirt farmers, and as the revolt spread, we found ourselves involved more and more. The affair reached a climax—at least as far as I was concerned — while we were in Nimes. Nimes is an extremely interesting place in its own right—it was important to the Romans as well as to the various barbarian peoples who controlled Provence at one time or another. But what medievalist worth of the title can stay in Nimes without making short excursions to Carcassonne, Avignon and Arles?

But it was no use. By this time the agrarian protest had become very vociferous and the farmers expressed their dissatisfaction with the partial measures advocated by the government by stopping all transport in southern France, whether by rail or road. This was accomplished by the simple expedient of erecting “barrages” across the railroads and highways: tractors, wagons, any piece of farm equipment were drawn across the road, completing

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THE DE GAULLE government, embarrassed elsewhere by revolts over the Algerian issue, could not afford an outbreak of violence — so no attempt was made to use force to break the barricades. Instead the motorist would find himself stopped by a police road block warning him that the road ahead was closed by a barrage.

However, as the revolt spread, the traffic police could not keep up with the situation and enormous traffic jams resulted. No one could get through—motor transports, tourist buses, private cars—all piled up in frustration behind the barricades. Foreign tourists (especially the Dutch and Germans, who live in well-regulated countries) tended to get exasperated, and tour directors stove in vain to explain that hotel reservations were already made and could not be changed. But no one got through and foreigners were obviously chagrined at the placidity of the French transport drivers who solved the problem by curling up under a tree with a bottle of wine until such time as the farmers got tired and went home.

DISAPPOINTED as I was in not being able to see a good many places that I had hoped to, I must admit that the expedients to which we were forced in trying to get around the blockades took us into some by-way that we would not otherwise have seen.

I have never expected to drive across a farmer's vineyard by means of two narrow ruts—but that was what traffic was doing and we did it too. And I was totally unaware of the existence of an extensive Celtic village in southern France, but in cutting across the back country not far from Montpellier we came across one which had been excavated on a hilltop and which was surrounded by the most interesting field pattern I have ever seen—even in the Twentieth Century farmers still plant their crops in fields which form pie-shaped wedges of a perfect Celtic circle. And in addition, we found ourselves being forced back to that magnificent old Roman ruin, the Pont du Gard, a number of times as we circled around to get out of Nîmes.

A PEASANT rebellion in the Twentieth Century seems an anachronism, and yet the causes of revolt may well be somewhat the same as the famous peasant uprisings of the Fourteenth Century: unfair exploitation of the workers of the soil and deflection of profits into the hands of a commercial class not personally concerned with agrarian production. One can see Avignon and Arles on almost any European tour—but surely there will not be many opportunities to observe an agrarian revolt at first hand.