

process, while Mokyr claims that they had become a rarity. Fifth, O'Neill makes a good deal of the importance of small insecure "conacre" holdings, a form of landholding greatly underplayed by Mokyr. Sixth, O'Neill gives considerable credit to L.M. Cullen's view that the potato was not very important in determining Irish demographic patterns, while Mokyr devastatingly attacks that view.

There are other differences as well as some points of agreement. The sad thing is that this fine book is already a scholarly generation out of date, because it did not directly address Mokyr's earlier studies. Nevertheless, it is stimulating reading.

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ROGER PRICE — *The Modernization of Rural France. Communications Networks and Agricultural Market Structures in Nineteenth-Century France*. London: Hutchinson, 1983. Pp. 503.

On no other issue have the reassessments of the "new economic history" had quite the same impact as on the relationship of railway construction to national economic development. Though the title does not make this immediately apparent, Roger Price's book is very much concerned with that issue. The author, however, has not set out to become the Fosel or Fishlow of the S.N.C.F. He is not concerned with attempts to measure the industrial linkages or social savings generated by railway building. What interests Price is how both producers and consumers of agricultural products were affected by the coming of the railway age. The question, he argues, cannot be tackled by economic history "narrowly conceived"; rather it is a job for the social historian who understands that economic problems are embedded in a broader social system. Thus, in this study "... economic history is seen not as an end in itself but as a means of understanding society better" (p. 13).

The Modernization of Rural France is divided into three parts. The first raises the curtain on France's poorly developed pre-rail transportation network. Here the author stresses the seasonal waterway bottlenecks and high cartage costs that limited the growth of an extended market for basic foodstuffs (whose low value-to-bulk ratio makes them especially sensitive to transport costs). The transport constraint becomes the motor driving Price's model of an economically inhibited countryside. "The hallmarks of this society were isolation and localism. The economy was far from stagnant, but the volume of trade, and in consequence the incentives to innovation in both agriculture and industry, were restricted by the costs of transport. The potential for dynamic action was limited" (p. 45).

Part Two discusses how this transport-hobbled *ancien régime économique* shaped the perceptions and behaviour of most Frenchmen. Here the author is concerned primarily with the origins and development of subsistence crises during the first half of the nineteenth century (though there is also much information on levels of living among the "popular classes"). Price includes a long chapter on time-honoured forms of protest by which the common people in cities, market towns, and along transport corridors tried to impose traditional, "moral economy" standards — attacking hoarders, blocking grain shipments outside the region, demanding fixed, "fair" (to the consumer) prices on bread. Three generations of social historians have addressed these themes, so most readers will find themselves on familiar terrain here. Price's particular contribution is to provide a wealth of local examples plus an analysis of the incidence of various forms of popular protest during the crop failures of 1846-47 and 1853-55. He is especially good at evoking the collective mentality aspects of subsistence crises, notably how the mere fear of dearth could push prices above levels actually warranted by local shortfalls in production. The author clearly feels himself on home ground when dealing with these topics; this chapter stands out as the best in the book.

Salvation is reached in Part Three — the “after” segment of this before-and-after study. It begins with a summary of railway building from the 1840s onwards. Price examines the motives which influenced the decisions of successive French governments on the routing of trunk and branch lines, and he describes the technical problems railway managers had to confront in pursuit of both engineering and economic efficiency. We are guided through a bewildering thicket of freight rates and the factors that influenced their levels and composition. This is followed by a look at how carters, barges and boatmen adapted to the challenge of the railway — in effect, how the prices of all forms of transport were driven down by the new competition.

The intent of Part Three is not just to describe the “transport revolution” but to show how it smashed open the prison of compartmentalized markets within which French agriculture had been languishing. Just as poor and costly transport had inhibited economic growth by constricting the size of product markets, so now cheap transport allowed French farmers to respond to the massive demand mobilized by an efficient national transportation network. The dynamic gains to be reaped through innovation and specialization were placed within their grasp. The producer shook off the restraining hand of merely local demand, and the consumer was freed from the spectre of regional dearth. A national market for basic foodstuffs was created and price fluctuations moderated considerably (see the graph on p. 335). A decisive page in France’s economic and social history had been turned.

So bald a summary cannot do justice to this book’s richness of detail nor, especially, to the amount of archival material the author deploys in support of his arguments. Yet in my opinion this study, admirable in many ways, is fundamentally flawed by the way Price chooses to approach the basic issues involved. In effect, he puts himself in the position of a man breaking down an open door. After all, when the author tells us that “... traditional forms of transport ... constituted a major obstacle to the development of a more unified market” (p. 286), are we likely to argue the contrary? The opposite question is not “was improved transport important?” but rather “how important was it?”

Put this another way: in pre-rail France “transport remained expensive” (p. 44) — a lesson Price is determined we learn by dint of repetition. But what does it mean? How do we know that transport is “expensive” and how shall we tell when it is becoming “cheap”? These are relative terms. To convey a useful meaning they require measurement. The appropriate measure is the proportion of total costs attributable to transport (both from factor markets and to product markets). Price knows this, but he holds that frequent variations in freight rates and the intrusion of other variables make this proportion pretty hard to calculate. That is true. But if the central argument of a five-hundred page book pivots around our belief in the growth-inhibiting constraints imposed by “expensive” transport, can a key issue of proof be dropped with a statistical shrug? There must be some indicators. For example, Price points out that millers charged farmers a standard fee for their services and increased it by one per cent in cases where they also took care of transport (p. 80). Granted that this must have meant local cartage. Yet it still is a signal that the ghastly roads and sandbar-infested rivers we have been hearing about didn’t have much effect on short-haul costs. Given that, shouldn’t the distances at which freight rates started to discourage the movement of bulk goods be thoroughly investigated? I don’t deny that such estimates are difficult to construct. But shouldn’t we nevertheless have a go at this, making the best of the data that are available? Wouldn’t that at any rate be better than just affirming again and again that pre-railway transport was “expensive”?

Price’s analysis of the structure of agricultural markets before the railway age (Chapter 3) presents analogous difficulties. His view is that the system of distribution of agricultural products (cereals mainly) was up against “the impermeability of space” (p. 92). The country was composed of hundreds of greater or lesser marketing centres, with each servicing a local or regional hinterland. Yet this hierarchy of market-places did not add up to a national market structure: “because of poor communications compartmentalization of the market structure remained a profound reality” (p. 92). And, as we have already seen, the hallmarks of that reality were “isolation and localism”.

The difficulty is that much of the descriptive evidence the author introduces in support of this thesis actually points to different conclusions. For instance, on pp. 58-62, 79 and 89 we find examples of price movements at one major town being followed by similar movements in towns hundreds of

kilometres away. We find merchants in Brittany and the Loire valley placing orders for grain in Marseille. We find grain regularly moving from the south all the way up the Rhône-Saône corridor. We find Montpellier businessmen (p. 63) renting mills to supply flour to a wide area including Avignon, Gard and Ardèche — isolated and backwoods areas if ever there were any!

Moreover, if pre-rail France was an economy of segmented product markets, why was it that grain growers “remained afraid” of competition from imported cereals? Apparently because “the protection afforded to most of them by high transport costs and relative isolation [not to mention trip-wire tariffs] gave insufficient security” (p. 64). But if distance didn’t protect them, whom did it protect? A few pages later we learn how “poor diffusion of information” about supply, demand and relative prices also contributed to France’s compartmentalized market structure (p. 69). Yet on the same page we are told that “... the news of arrivals of foreign grains in the ports was enough to cause a fall in prices further inland.” A page further on we are informed that the “... *threat* of international competition resulted in a *tendency* for national [sic] prices to align themselves with international prices” (p. 70, author’s emphasis). What has happened to “localism and isolation” now?

One has to wonder because, as the author admits, “by a kind of wave-like movement changes in prices were transferred from one market to another, [albeit] with declining intensity as distance increased transport costs and reduced the degree of interaction between markets” (p. 58). But the very examples used to illustrate this wave-like action are drawn from long-distance commerce. At this point the reader would surely be grateful to be told exactly how far one has to go for the costs of transport to become prohibitive. More importantly, he probably would also like to know how the author proposes to square another general statement with his model of disconnected markets.

In general, prices at an under-supplied market tended to rise until sufficient outside supplies were attracted [by high prices] to satisfy consumer demand. Thus the commercial response to high prices might have the effect of equalizing price levels between geographically distinct places as a result of movements [of grain] from areas of relatively low price to those of relatively high price (pp. 71-72). The “might” aside, can you think of a better description of how a market works? If both prices and grain supply moved towards equilibrium “between geographically distinct places”, then the compartments boxing in pre-rail product markets look pretty permeable!

I am sure the author would want to reply that this sort of criticism is unfair because price and supply flow adjustments were relatively faster, larger and more regular after the coming of the railway. But that is precisely the point of this critique. To speak the language of “relatively” is to ask for measurement: relative to what? To the previous situation — yesterday in comparison with today — but also to the contributions attributable to other economic changes during the period (e.g., in factor costs, population growth, new production techniques, etc.). Such changes would themselves be influenced by transport improvements, just as they too would affect the latter. In this interlocking world of cause and effect it is never easy to assign weights to different factors. Yet the attempt needs to be made. The alternative is to find oneself leaping from one verbal ice floe to the next — “significant rise”, “considerable fall” — instead of facing the problem head-on.

Perhaps the best illustration of Price’s reluctance to confront the “relative-to-what” issue concerns the question of social savings. The author did consider trying to measure the total benefits the French economy derived from the transport revolution. Pointing out that “the concept of social saving is not an invention of the ‘new economic history’” (p. 287), he produces an 1853 estimate that rail transport of grain and flour alone saved one-third of the cost that would have been incurred had road or water transport been used. But then he drops the topic with a reference to inadequate statistics, followed by doubts about “achieving meaningful calculations of the savings achieved ...”, and a lament to the effect that “the analytical problems are too complicated” (pp. 287-88). Let me agree wholeheartedly that the statistical difficulties are formidable. But is the problem really too tough to contemplate? Using the same data available to Price, François Caron calculated that the direct social savings represented by rail shipment of freight over the hypothetical costs of shipment by road and canal came to 5.8 per cent of French national income in 1872. Price might well object that this figure lends dubious precision to a complex question. Yet in what way are the author’s favourite judgmental

adjectives, “considerable” and “significant”, superior to Caron’s broad-brush estimate? At least we can inspect Caron’s calculations, question his assumptions, and factor in more data if we can dig them up. But how can you argue with “considerable” or “significant”?

Many questions of this type could be cited, but they all turn round the central issue of treating transport as the independent variable pushing rural France into the modern world. Price knows that other factors were at work (notably autonomous increases in real consumer income), but his analysis is not constructed in such a way as to allow a relative weight to be assigned to the particular contribution made by improved transport. Instead, we are left with accurate but not very helpful conclusions like “the reduction of transport costs substantially modified the conditions for economic activity” (pp. 314-16).

The Modernization of Rural France is a big and expensive book. Its richness of detail and breadth of documentation stand as a tribute to Roger Price’s extraordinary powers of research. As a descriptive work it constitutes an important contribution to our understanding of the slow transformation of agriculture and agrarian society in modern France. Social historians in particular will appreciate the sheer mass of information about the rural world which Price has assembled. Economic historians, however, may well feel that this could have been a better, more persuasive book if the author had matched his capacity for research with the discipline of a more rigorously specified economic analysis.

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BARNETT SINGER — *Village Notables in Nineteenth-Century France: Priests, Mayors, Schoolmasters*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983. Pp. viii, 199.

Barnett Singer’s recent study of priests, mayors, and schoolmasters — the “village notables” of rural France — is an interesting little book. The author’s own modesty in the introduction makes it seem as though the book is intended to be an appendix to Eugen Weber’s classic and controversial *Peasants into Frenchmen*. Singer writes that his study “lies under the huge shadow” (p. 1) of Weber’s book. He sees his book as “attributing more of an active role to rural notables than (Weber) does by stressing the in-betweenness of their function in rural society” (pp. 1-2). Like Weber, Singer has an eye for significant detail, and his study is brimming with stories lovingly culled from archives of the *département* of France. Unlike Weber, Singer does not really have a major thesis about social change; he asserts that the roles of priests, mayors, and schoolmasters in rural France have been insufficiently studied, and that they were important and sometimes unappreciated figures in the dramas of the century, often caught between the superiors they were responsible to and the villagers they were supposed to serve. Singer sees, correctly, I think, “no village of the nineteenth century as a perfectly cutoff entity, perfectly virginal, untouched by national trends” (p. 2). Yet his view of rural France before the Third Republic is not far from Weber’s; he describes it as “a largely dependent world, a world deprived of mass media, mobility, or the economic independence that would also have permitted independence from the local ‘guides,’ the local notables who had their position because of the nature of rural society as a whole” (p. 3). He discusses how mayors and schoolteachers contributed to the rooting of republican institutions in rural France, and accepts the interpretation that anti-clericalism in the villages, more than occasionally orchestrated by the two non-clerical members of the eternal village triangle, accentuated and at the same time reflected the diminished status of the priest as a notable. Few would quibble with this, but perhaps his conclusion that all notables have disappeared from rural France is more questionable.