

TIMOTHY TACKETT. — *Priest and Parish in Eighteenth-Century France*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977. Pp. xiii, 350.

This valuable book generally confirms by solid statistical evidence conclusions reached from literary sources by Professor Tackett's predecessors, particularly Maurice Hutt. The title is indeed somewhat misleading, for the greater part of the book is concerned with the curés of a particular area, the Alpine diocese of Gap, which lay principally in Southern Dauphiné. The subject is nevertheless one of general significance, for the crisis in France which immediately preceded the Revolution was most serious in two of the more remote provinces, Brittany and Dauphiné, and Tackett has now provided us with a study of the situation of the clergy in the latter which can be compared with the well-known work of John McManners on Angers. Moreover, the curés of Dauphiné undoubtedly contributed considerably to the formation of clerical opinion throughout France, for they had commonly experienced, and to some extent overcome, difficulties familiar to many other priests. Tackett shows that there was in his area an exceptionally high concentration of priests wholly dependent upon a fixed salary or '*portion congrue*' paid to them by absentee tithes-owners; that the poverty of these priests was aggravated by excessive taxation; and that they became influential because their situation was so general in Dauphiné that they could and did organise themselves to secure more adequate representation on the diocesan tax-boards.

The author explains that the first purpose of his research was "to learn more about the position and status of the parish priests in society and their relations with their lay parishioners" (p. 3). This purpose he has achieved principally by constructing a collective biography through quantification. That rather frightening phraseology, which is not Tackett's own, simply means that he has systematically classified much of the information he has gathered from exhaustive research and presented it both in lucid prose and in an illuminating series of distribution-maps, graphs and bar-graphs. Although the omission of an initial map to show the situation of Gap in relation to the other dioceses and the provinces of south-eastern France is regrettable, both the author and his publishers deserve congratulation for these illustrations. This statistical information does not, however, stand alone: throughout the book Tackett entwines the general with the particular, using personal as well as administrative records. The happy consequence is that we not only see a developing situation in the diocese, but also appreciate much of what this meant in terms of the interests, aspirations and anxieties of actual priests like Alexandre Achard of Serres and the botanist Dominique Chaix of Les Baux.

In all this Tackett's work merits high praise. Although he remarks that he was fortunate in finding at Gap a remarkably rich collection of archival material, he has manifestly made good use of many other records and secondary studies as well; and although his subject has demanded understanding of many legal and ecclesiastical technicalities, his exposition is consistently clear. It is also fortunately free from the pretentious terminology of our own time: the curés are, for example, described as an élite, but that much-abused word is precisely and appropriately defined. Moreover, although this work is in fact a pioneering local study, Tackett makes whatever comparisons with other areas our present knowledge permits, and he never loses sight of the national context and significance of his subject. His book is indeed scholarly in the true sense, for it is based on meticulous research and written with dispassionate caution and sensitivity. Rare indeed are writers ready to admit that "it is impossible to distinguish calculation of personal advantage from altruistic moral fervor" (p. 267).

The value of this approach is apparent in its results. Tackett shows that, despite the differences between individuals and parishes, the curés of Gap were generally alike in their origins, education, professional careers and social and economic circumstances. He shows that they were respected and influential men who took their spiritual and increasingly onerous temporal responsibilities seriously; and he also shows that they were generally over-worked, under-paid, over-taxed and frustrated by the aristocracy's monopoly and exploitation of high office in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Here as elsewhere, the great distinction in old France was not that between the legal orders of society, but between aristocracy and democracy. As the abbé Sieyès pertinently put it, those outside the pale were perpetually confronted by an interdict: "Whatever be your services, whatever your talents, you shall go thus far and no farther. It is not fitting for you to be honoured."

Tackett's second purpose, that of broadening understanding of the 'process of politicization' of the parish clergy in the 1780s, involves argument of a different kind. While he shows that the curés of Gap won the right to meet in conference, to deliberate on the '*portion congrue*' and to elect representatives to the tax-boards, his exposition inevitably becomes increasingly concerned with the wider subject of clerical activity in Dauphiné and in the whole of France. Here he unfortunately becomes unduly allusive, assuming that his material is too familiar to warrant the recapitulation his study really requires. Still more unfortunately, the Revolution itself is but briefly surveyed, though much might have been made of the tragic position of the many curés of Gap who apparently retained their confidence in the new order until they encountered the dechristianisation drive of 1793-94. Perhaps, however, the quality of Tackett's work is best indicated by this uncommon complaint, that it ends too soon.

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GEOFFREY CROSSICK, ed. *The Lower Middle Class in Britain 1870-1914*. London: Croom Helm, 1977. Pp. 213.

The historian interested in the social structure of nineteenth-century Britain is well served for the landed class, and nobody could complain that the working class has been ignored of late. But it is remarkable how little systematic work has been done on what lay in between, for this most "middle-class" century of a very "middle-class" country. The gap is beginning to be filled, however. At the upper end, W. D. Rubenstein's work on probate sources is showing that the really big money was to be made not in industry but in finance and commerce.¹ At the other end, this excellent collection of articles looks at the heterogeneous group composed, on the one hand, of small independent businessmen and shopkeepers, and on the other, of white-collar employees.

While the editor offers the book to begin a discussion, not to end it, one theme comes through very clearly in most of the essays: that the lower middle class was under increasing economic and social pressure from the 1870s on. The

¹ W. D. RUBENSTEIN, "Wealth, Elites and the Class Structure of Modern Britain," *Past & Present*, 76 (Aug. 1977): 99-126; "The Victorian Middle Classes: Wealth, Occupation, and Geography," *Economic History Review*, 2 s. XXX (Nov. 1977): 602-23.