Introduction

Neither the frost nor the autumn rain brought damp into the houses that day. Beneath the jutting cliff that peered over the river Tarn the smell of smoke, so familiar to the villagers of La Malène, began to arouse fear. Armed men who had crossed into the department of Lozère from neighbouring Ardèche had drunk all of the wine in the village and slaughtered all of the pigs. Now this 'band of assassins, known as the revolutionary army' set out to destroy what remained. 'They tied up our inconsolable women and subjected them to constant terror and mortal threat in front of the horrible spectacle of flames engulfing their homes.' La Malène, inhabited by some eighty people, was razed on 4 November 1793. Those who survived the calamity described how 'nothing was spared, neither our belongings, nor our livelihoods. Everything was reduced to ash.'[1]

Gabriel de Brun de Montesquiou, *seigneur* of La Malène, was among those whose possessions were consumed by the fire. He and his wife Marie-Catherine du Pont de Ligonnès owned the château de La Malène and two of the houses in the village along with various stables and barns. The couple had raised three children and employed four servants in the household. Produce that had been harvested from their lands by peasants or bartered locally to store for nourishment over the winter caught alight and burned. Among the losses were twenty *cartes* of wheat, sixteen of barley, twenty-four of oats, and sixty of chestnuts; forty pounds of butter, thirty of lard, and twenty-four of cooking fat; one pig, one ewe, twenty pounds of rice, and two *cartes* of lentils.[2] The fire also took colanders, pots, casseroles, and a cauldron; beds and linen; mirrors, chairs, chests, and tables; chimney guards, pails for wood, bedroom tapestries, and a large leather tapestry depicting the grape harvest in the style of Louis XIII. Most distressing for the noble *seigneur* was the destruction of some of his family papers in the blaze.[3]

The damage wrought by the fire at La Malène forms part of a wider picture of material loss for the Brun de Montesquiou family and other nobles during the French Revolution.[4] In 1797 Gabriel de Brun de Montesquiou tried to calculate the financial sums involved for his own family using the debased paper currency that had been in circulation. The decrees of 4 August 1789 deprived him of seigneurial dues worth around 1,500 *assignats* each year. Gabriel's eldest son, Jean-Baptiste de Brun de Montesquiou, had participated in the 1789 assembly of nobles of the province of Gévaudan and was married to the daughter of another noble of the province, Gilberte de Pons de la Grange. The dowry brought to the marriage in 1784 was to have been worth some 60,000 *assignats*, but around half the dowry was still owed to the Brun de Montesquiou when the Pons de la Grange family properties were seized and sold as *biens nationaux*. Jean-Baptiste fathered three children by his wife before her death in 1790. The forty-year-old widower decided to emigrate and join the princes' army, leaving his three infants in the care of their paternal grandparents, Gabriel and Marie-Catherine. On 12 October 1793 Gabriel, aged seventy-two, was placed under arrest as a suspect because of Jean-Baptiste's emigration. He and Marie-Catherine were imprisoned until 1795, which meant they did not witness the fire at La Malène. Their townhouse in Mende was ransacked then sold. The couple lost 12,000 *assignats*' worth of linen, clothing, and other goods from this townhouse as well as 5,000 *assignats*' *worth* of annual *rentes* from land they owned in the diocese of Mende. Gabriel estimated that over an eight-year period from 1789 to 1797 he and his family had realised losses of property and income totalling some 134,000 *assignats*.[5]

A fundamental question that this book sets out to answer is how nobles like the Brun de Montesquiou re-established themselves as landowners and maintained patrimony. At its origin the concept of 'patrimony', a word derived from the Latin words *patrimonium* and *pater*, was designed to enable the ensemble of a father's goods to be transmitted to his children. Hence, the Roman jurist Gaïus distinguished between goods subject to private appropriation (*res in patrimonio*) and goods that were not (*res extra patrimonio*). Two nineteenth-century legal theorists in France, Aubry (1803–83) and Rau (1803–77), developed the concept of patrimony within French law where property ownership is understood as a universal right for every legal individual. In theory the emphasis on universality makes the value of what is owned irrelevant: a street beggar with just a few belongings has patrimony, and legal rights associated with it, in exactly the same way that a millionaire with countless belongings does. The notion that patrimony derives from a legal individual, never a group, family, or company, is also significant in French jurisprudence. Within the ensemble of goods making up a legal individual's patrimony there are both tangible and intangible items. The Civil Code (article 516) distinguishes two kinds of tangible property: movable goods (*meubles*) and immovable goods (*immeubles*). Intangible property includes such things as names, traditions, inventions, mottoes, brands, and creative works.[6]

The Civil Code is the legal instrument most often invoked in France on matters concerning an individual's patrimony. In the twenty-first century, however, there is also the Code du patrimoine for the protection of the nation's cultural, artistic, and architectural heritage. The Code du patrimoine builds upon earlier French legislation, notably the Loi sur les monuments historiques (31 December 1913), the Loi Malraux (31 December 1968), and the Loi sur les archives (3 January 1979).[7] France is one of the countries to feature within the European Heritage Network, a resource for conservators, researchers, and policy-makers established under the auspices of the Council of Europe. National heritage policies vary within the European Union but there is a common context created through the European Cultural Convention (1954), the Convention for the Protection of the Architectural Heritage of Europe (1985), and the European Convention on the Protection of Archaeological Heritage (1992).[8]

To investigate nobles' maintenance of patrimony thus requires close attention to the nobility's relations with the State, which has been a crucial theme in medieval and early modern French history but remains under-explored for the post-revolutionary period.[9] Nobles' roles and activities after 1789 have tended to be subsumed within studies of male 'notables'. André-Jean Tudesq argued that by the middle of the nineteenth century nobles and haut bourgeois were largely united in their outlook and behaviour. Concentrating on the decade of the 1840s, Tudesq developed the notion of 'a single social psychology' characteristic to the men of his study, *les grands notables*. These large-scale property owners experienced some decline in their economic power and political influence in the final quarter of the nineteenth century. An agricultural crisis triggered a fall in land prices, whilst growing popular support for the Third Republic regime meant that increasing numbers of middle-class men with professional careers, such as doctors and lawyers, were elected to parliament. In Daniel Halévy's interpretation the 1870s marked 'the end of the notables'.[10]

This book presents a new reading of landed elites that for the period from 1789 to the 2000s aims at radical reversal of 'nobles' disappearance from modern French historical thought'.[11] Patrimony that originally belonged to the nobility provides evidence not only of nobles' experiences but also of the impact their existence had on people of lower social strata. Since the 1960s historians have devoted much effort to writing history 'from below', raising awareness of sources about the experiences of people accustomed to oppression. One of the paradoxes of historians shunning the study of nineteenth- and twentieth-century nobility has been to leave gaps in understanding of why and how and which sources have survived from an elite minority historically accustomed to rule.

In documenting nobles' interactions with the State, I argue for the distinctiveness of nobles' lived experiences that is downplayed by those historians who accept the notion of 'a single social psychology' shared by noble and bourgeois property owners. That is not to say that nobles and bourgeois were necessarily in conflict, or that there were no similarities at all. It was a symbiotic relationship. Yet the nobility's persistent concern to protect noble identity meant there were contrasts between the social strata in practices and attitudes with regard to inheritance and the cultivation of collective memory. Those contrasts appear in sharpest definition when analysed over a period of time longer than a single decade or a single political regime. This book adopts a longer chronological range, looking back to the watershed of the French Revolution and just as importantly continuing beyond the fall of the Second Empire. My choice of a *longue durée* perspective reflects the influence of innovative approaches and concepts introduced to the field of nobility studies by scholars of the Middle Ages and early modern era.[12]

Historians as well as archivists, curators, and specialists in art and architectural conservation have abiding professional interests in how notions of 'national' patrimony developed and continue to evolve in France. In the wake of the French Revolution abbé Grégoire and Alexandre Lenoir are credited with recognising that important traces of the *ancien régime* should be preserved; the beginnings of a systematic approach to identification and documentation of heritage date from the July Monarchy. In 1830, at François Guizot's instigation, the Ministry of the Interior hired art historian Ludovic Vitet and author Prosper Mérimée as inspectors of historic monuments to identify and catalogue France's most significant sites and structures. From 1840 the newly created Commission des monuments historiques appointed architects, notably Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, to supervise the restoration of structures on the list of classed monuments. Victor Hugo lobbied for a system of quality control by experts and influenced the drafting of the first law on historic monuments adopted on 30 March 1887. Across the nineteenth century conservators and curators in public museums, archives, and galleries were working to refine policies and pursue strategies for augmenting national collections.[13]

Alongside these initiatives by State bodies and by male 'pioneers of patrimony' numerous lesser-known citizens were also making contributions to the preservation and interpretation of cultural property. After 1789 a diverse range of groups in French society were engaged in nurturing collective memories of the revolutionary and Napoleonic decades, for which all kinds of artefacts and intangibles like dances and songs were useful.[14] Learned societies, academies, and institutes that flourished from the 1830s catalogued and studied patrimony in the provinces. These associational networks were comprised mostly of men of the middling bourgeoisie who embraced liberal values, although nobles and clerics also joined some of the societies. Under the July Monarchy (1830–48) the associational networks gained support from central authorities for their promotion of patrimony and the Minister of Public Instruction, François Guizot, created a Comité des travaux historiques. But the French State grew increasingly ambivalent about associational networks advancing local or provincial causes and fostering sentiments and interpretations of the past deemed to be dangerous to national unity.[15]

Meanwhile noble families in post-revolutionary France were interacting with the State over patrimony in private ownership. There were only some 5,033 of these families by 1900, and numbers fell to 4,075 families by 1975.[16] In this predominantly Catholic milieu most nobles maintained longstanding political allegiances to empire or monarchy. During the early decades of the Third Republic the State introduced new laws to protect 'national' patrimony (1887, 1913) and government policy on many fronts was geared toward embedding republicanism and promoting republican interpretations of the past. It was precisely in this period of consolidation for France's republican regime that the nobility was strengthening its participation in heritage and arts bodies. Cultural patronage committees were presided over by nobles. Aristocratic collectors donated particular items or whole private collections to public museums and galleries. Across the twentieth century nobles set up, presided over and joined organisations such as La Demeure historique, La Sauvegarde de l'art français, Le Comité Vendôme, Vieilles maisons françaises and SOS Paris.[17] These types of initiatives have meant that, whilst the number of nobles serving as elected representatives in national politics has declined since the 1870s, the nobility has sustained significant influence in France's cultural sector as the meanings attached to the term '*le patrimoine*' have evolved.[18] In France patrimony has never lost its legal definition in the Civil Code for an individual's rights over property. Under the Fifth Republic, however, patrimony gained a further definition in government circles and among the French people as a way of conceiving of public cultural assets. Nobles have been vitally engaged with all of the shifts in legislation and in political and cultural interpretations of patrimony from 1789 right up to the present day.

On the other side of the English Channel there has been contemporaneous growth of aristocratic influence in the arts and heritage sector.[19] This can be explained by certain commonalities between the British and French upper classes in their preservationist instincts and pecuniary concerns for tax relief, as well as participation in transnational social networks, leisure, and travel.[20] The impact of 1789 upon society in France, however, meant that French nobles' stake in the elaboration of 'national' patrimony did not evolve in precisely the same way as the evolution of English peers' stake in the heritage industry of Britain. The ebb and flow of anti-aristocratic sentiment and the aristocracy's parliamentary representation were patterned differently in the two countries.

During the first half of the twentieth century the context for negotiations between private owners and the French State about 'national' patrimony was profoundly shaped by the destruction that took place during the two world wars. In the wake of revolutions and wars people in all parts of the world find that the existence of cultural property helps to restore quality of life and sense of community; such property may also be the subject of legal claims or efforts to establish legal rights.[21] After the Second World War international efforts led to the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (1954). The increasing commercialisation within museums and the wider heritage industry has sharpened attention to the ways in which sites, objects and intangibles can be marketed for the benefit of national and local economies.[22] As custodians of archives, paintings, furniture, jewellery, and *objets d'art* noblewomen and noblemen have been continuously involved in decisions over what happens to such items. In France properties historically owned by nobility attract tourism that remains vitally important for communes across the country.

Given the range of reasons for which patrimony holds 'value' then, it is a curious paradox that among academic historians the subject of life at the château after 1789 has been regularly dismissed, neglected, and pushed to the margins of modern French history. For, if France is proud of its revolutionary heritage symbolised by the Bastille, visitors today will see that older forms of heritage associated with noble identity are hardly suppressed or missing from the matrix of images the nation presents of itself to the world.

Origins, lifestyles, and challenges

We can never know precisely the size of the noble population in France on the eve of the French Revolution. The most reliable historical estimates suggest between 17,000 and 26,000 families; the number of noble individuals is thought to have been between 110,000 and 120,000.[23] Who were these people and how did they live?

In eighteenth-century France the nobility was a very diverse social group in which differences in families' origins and material circumstances encouraged a sense of internal hierarchy among members. At the top of the social ladder were some two hundred ancient and illustrious families who had greatest access to the court by virtue of their pedigree. These were nobles who could trace their aristocratic ancestry back to 1400 or further, which meant they were eligible for presentation to the monarch. Among them was a smaller elite of court nobility (*la noblesse de la cour*) who regularly attended upon the royal family. Members of this select group had to attract favour from the king in the form of lucrative pensions, court offices, high commands, and governorships to enable them to pursue court habits. Incomes at this level of French society were generally in the order of 50,000–200,000 *livres* per year, reaching to 500,000 *livres* for dukes and into the millions for princes.[24] Expenses were large in scale, and so were many rich nobles' debts. Constant jockeying to secure one's position as a favourite in the eyes of the king and queen gave rise to the verbal jousting and slights that peppered social interaction. Elsewhere in eighteenth-century France there were plenty of nobles of very ancient lineage who did not participate in court rituals or visit the capital because they could not afford the expense. There were also families who had attained recent ennoblement, most commonly through purchase of a heritable office.[25]

Provincial nobility, those who lived year-round in the countryside, had smaller fortunes than nobles who lodged at Versailles or in Paris, and their expenditure was configured rather differently from that of *les grands*. Around three and half thousand families with incomes of 10,000–50,000 *livres* per year represented the most affluent segment living in sumptuous style away from the capital. Elegance and finery mattered to these nobles, but for them the desire for social advancement was hedged by concerns about the pecuniary risks of chasing superiors' favour and, for some, distaste for Parisian mores.[26] There were around twice as many nobles, or seven thousand families, living very comfortably on incomes of 4,000–10,000 *livres* per year. Like their wealthier counterparts, these nobles tailored their expenditure to create an impression of ease and *bon ton*. Then there was a considerably larger group of perhaps eleven thousand families whose incomes were less than 4,000 *livres*. These nobles led a frugal existence, avoiding outlay for new clothes or entertaining, but they could still afford to employ a few servants. Finally some five thousand families had incomes of less than 1,000 *livres* per year, which meant they were subject to financial hardship bordering on poverty.[27]

Members of the provincial nobility, even those who enjoyed considerable luxury, were often looked down upon for their 'country manners' by the *habitués* of Versailles and Paris. But within rural communities such nobles were the local lords who owned the château, *maison de maître*, manor, or *castel*, and who exercised control over key resources, notably land but also mills, presses, ponds, orchards, and forests. In practice, the manner in which they exercised control depended on frequency and length of residency. It was customary for most nobles to divide their time between different estates and spend part of the year in a townhouse in a regional urban centre. With greater amounts of absenteeism came greater reliance on local agents, especially the steward (*le régisseur*). Marital alliances combined with frequent purchases or exchanges of property within and between families meant that nobles' socio-economic networks criss-crossed the country. Nevertheless, the majority of nobles, whilst known for a peripatetic lifestyle, tended to identify with one province in which to a considerable extent they were socially and economically embedded.

One set of challenges to 'living nobly' arose out of France's physical geography and the ways in which environmental change interacted with political and economic change. On an everyday basis, as well as at times of crises such as food shortage or natural disaster, those challenges contributed to shaping the dynamics of nobles' relationships with other inhabitants of rural communities. Historians have long debated the transformative effects of the French Revolution for the cultivation of land.[28] The abolition of the seigneurial system meant that over time peasants became more likely to own their own land and even those who rented plots had greater autonomy to decide which crops to grow and how to grow them. With the steady improvement of transport infrastructure and communications, new opportunities collided with age-old environmental constraints.[29] The nobility, like the rural bourgeoisie, leased portions of land to lower-middle-class and working-class cultivators on a tenant farming or sharecropping basis. Cultivation practices were extremely diverse. Many noble landowners were also engaged in farming, not in the sense of tilling the soil with their own hands, but rather by employing labourers to carry out their instructions about which crops to sow and which animals to breed for market demand; on some estates there were tracts of forest and mineral reserves, which when exploited brought further income through sales of timber, clay, iron and other substances important to manufacture. Environment and economy were not simply in the backdrop of social relations in rural communities; rather they formed a motor in human interaction because livelihoods depended upon natural resources.

A second set of challenges stemmed from the law. In the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, and much subsequent legislation, property ownership was upheld as a basic right of citizens subject to legal protection. Whilst the nobility and bourgeoisie faced some similar issues with regard to property there was more divergence in their experiences (but not in their standing as citizens) before the law than is generally recognised. Nobiliary law is a branch of the legal discipline no longer taught in French law faculties today. Yet it still operates to regulate transmission of nobiliary titles and there is extensive jurisprudence from the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries demonstrating how these rules have been applied in court. At France's highest judicial level, the Conseil d'État made explicit reference to the 'rules of French nobiliary law' in a decision handed down on 25 February 1983.[30] Nobiliary law is complex because its sources are a mix of constitutional texts, decisions taken by different sovereigns, parliamentary acts, and foreign legislation applying to territories that have shifted into another nation's possession. This branch of the law exists within the legal systems of other European countries too, which can be relevant in jurisprudence because of transnational ties among the nobility. The complexity in France is further increased because each change of political regime through the nineteenth century was accompanied by an overhaul to the legalities associated with nobiliary titles. Modifications to family and property law could have profound ramifications for nobles whose rights to titles, related possessions, and forms of income were all bound up in nobiliary law. In particular, Napoleon's introduction of the entail system known as the *majorat* in 1808 sealed for the recipients of imperial titles, as well as for the *ancienne noblesse*, a singular fate with regard to experiences of the legal system that were never shared by bourgeois property owners to whom nobiliary law did not apply.[31]

Sources and approach

This book is based principally on empirical research carried out in *archives privées* produced by nobility.[32] The very creation of these collections (*fonds*) of nobles' private papers deposed in public repositories is a form of marking and preserving patrimony – a core issue explored in following chapters. For information on certain topics it has been helpful to investigate public archives as well, particularly the M series (Administration and economy 1800–1940) and Q series (Property). Supplementing these archival sources, I have drawn on newspapers and on published reports from a range of government and non-government bodies that provided quantitative and qualitative data to establish a national overview of property.

Whilst this is original research for the history of France, there do exist models for such a study treating similar themes. One of the purposes of placing the post-1789 French nobility at the centre of enquiry is to show how the wealth of source material available in France can be gathered and exploited for the type of research on nobles, country houses, and landed estates undertaken for other countries of continental Europe and Britain.[33] The broad range of complex institutions and practices relevant for understanding the nobility's relationship to family property are brought together and surveyed here, in the hope that researchers in the future will give each phenomenon deeper attention in articles, monographs, and dissertations. The list of archival sources is intended to serve as a finding aid to stimulate research, and many of the collections could become the basis for a doctoral thesis. In the 2000s scholars continue to call for more empirical and more comparative work on European nobilities, especially for the twentieth century.[34]

Why choose private archives scattered across the country as sources of historical evidence? To date, there have been few efforts to investigate nobles' circumstances using a national representative sample for the post-revolutionary period. From the starting point of research he conducted in the department of Dordogne, Ralph Gibson sought 'to try and collate material from other areas, and to set [his] own as far as possible in the national context.'[35] Keenly aware of the difficulties created by varying definitions of nobility in the historical literature, Gibson nonetheless sought to make some comparisons between departments, bringing together information on nobles' geographic distribution across France, with details on levels of tax payment and amounts of land owned derived from the cadastre.[36] In a similar way, but as part of a larger study for the decades 1800–70, David Higgs presented quantitative findings on nobles' landowning for different departments, such as could be drawn from electoral rolls and tax records. He also tackled issues such as the evolving influence of aristocratic landowners in national and local politics.[37]

Both Gibson and Higgs pointed to some of the problems of working from public records for nobles. Both these historians recognised that there were major aspects of nobles' post-revolutionary experiences on which speculation was possible but which really needed further historical investigation. Patterns of residency, cultures of estate management, and levels of involvement in agriculture were among those aspects that remained 'hidden' from the researcher using public archives.[38] Equally obscure to historians consulting such records was information about family strategies to transmit property, the aesthetics of 'home' for nobility, and social interaction. In what ways did noblewomen participate in the running of an estate? How were aristocratic children taught about financial matters including ways to exercise thrift and keep track of debt? When and why were nobles' properties 'modernised', turned into heritage sites for tourist consumption, or left to fall into ruin? Where did nobles look for ideas on how to decorate the interiors of châteaux and townhouses or what to plant in parks and gardens? What were the hiring procedures and wages for servants and outdoor labourers? How much interaction did nobles have with stewards, tenants, neighbouring landowners, and residents of local towns and villages? In what ways did such relationships evolve?

Questions like these about key aspects of nobles' daily life would remain impossible to resolve if, as Robert Forster argued in 1963, evidence in the form of personal correspondence, diaries, business letters, receipts and accounts, notary records, memoirs, wills and other legal documents was 'extremely rare'.[39] In fact, the evidence is not lacking at all. It exists in spectacular abundance but is dispersed all over France in nobles' *archives privées*.[40]

Increasingly, these types of archives are being sought out and used by historians, most often for micro-histories focusing on a single family or a cluster of families.[41] Studies of nobles in particular regions of France have also been produced.[42] However, questions about nobles' lived experiences in post-revolutionary France deserve to be answered for more than one family or one region at a time. Many of the questions treated in this book are not amenable to statistical enquiry by their very nature. But that does not mean that one cannot establish what is typical or what is exceptional by drawing upon a wide array of archival material from across France. This book is intended to be not a quantitative study but rather an effort to enter into understanding nobles' emotions and motivations regarding patrimony, to bring out how they perceived the threats and opportunities that pertained to its ownership in the modern world.

The conceptual tools used in my interpretation come from the social sciences.[43] Pioneering work by Pierre Bourdieu and Monique de Saint Martin on conversions and reconversions of capital, cultural field, gift exchange, and habitus underpins my approach to the study of class and power.[44] Application of these theoretical concepts in a study of modern French history requires grounding in the laws that defined both the constraints and the room to manoeuvre for families seeking to protect different forms of capital (economic, social, cultural, and symbolic).

Chapters 1 to 4 form a sequence in which social history is combined with history of law to investigate the effects of legal reform upon nobles' transmission of tangible and intangible patrimony. New laws originating in the French Revolution (for example on partible inheritance, marriage and divorce, and adoption) as well as the introduction of Napoleon's Civil Code, the *majorat*, and other legal innovations are examined using archival case studies. I draw attention to the challenges as well as to the possibilities for nobles to benefit from the French Revolution. Chapters 5 to 8 also form a sequence in which social history is combined with cultural and political history to investigate how nobles' tangible and intangible patrimony has been managed and communicated to the public. Here and in some earlier chapters novels and art are brought in to the discussion for the light they shine on matters of preoccupation to French society. Archival documentation provides the empirical base for analysing the nobility's repertoire of techniques for upholding its identity.

Equally important to this book's analytic aims and resonating through the whole work are Maurice Halbwachs's writings on the social frameworks of memory, those 'instruments used by the collective memory to reconstruct an image of the past which is in accord, in each epoch, with the predominant thoughts of the society'. When analysing the traditions of groups, such as families and social classes, Halbwachs argued: 'It is not sufficient, in effect, to show that individuals always use social frameworks when they remember. It is necessary to place oneself in the perspective of the group.'[45] Both before and after 1789, it was very important to the French nobility to try to keep its 'framework for family memory' intact because this constituted families' 'traditional armour' for protecting noble identity.[46] Noble families' elaboration of collective memory took place privately through the aristocratic tradition of educating children in the home and rituals of sociability. As noble families constructed collective memory over time, out of selective myth-like versions of real events, they bequeathed these fictions to the next generation. Stories about ancestors repeatedly told to children were essential to maintain collective memory, and were often written down in the form of memoirs, whether or not intended for publication. Oral traditions formed part of noble families' intangible patrimony together with names and titles, coats of arms, livery colours, hunting fanfares, and family mottoes.[47]

Combining theoretical insights with an archival research strategy provides an opportunity to be very clear about who is being identified as 'noble' and why.[48] Historians, sociologists, and anthropologists have long insisted on rigour in defining 'peasant'.[49] Yet, as Gibson and others have pointed out, imprecision in identifying nobility continues to be a problem in the much smaller academic literature on landowning elites, which impacts on historical study of the ways in which landowners exercised power.[50] Unless care is taken to address landowners' identities, historians will remain handicapped when investigating aspects of social authority and responses to it. This includes fundamental patterns of human behaviour such as deference, paternalism, patronage, and mediation.

In drawing upon archival material I have sought to enable the voices of individuals to emerge frequently throughout the book. Letters and other personal writings allow access to nobles' preoccupations and also to the experiences of the bourgeoisie and of the working class who lived in rural and urban communities. An imponderable amount can never be 'heard' by us today, of course, and it should not be imagined that the ways in which villagers and townsfolk used language in writing to nobles at the château, or to the mayor, or the *curé*, or to national authorities, were the ways in which villagers and townsfolk spoke among themselves. But by examining the evidence that we have of interaction among these people of differing backgrounds we begin to interpret the nuances, and to identify the gaps and the silences.

The strongly centralised nature of the modern French State means that a proportion of the bureaucratic and legislative paperwork in the archives emanated from the capital. Paris itself, however, does not feature a great deal in the following pages.[51] My research has been concerned with identifying how the laws and bureaucratic instructions were received and responded to in communes situated away from Paris. Eighteenth-century nobles who lived year-round in the provinces held a variety of attitudes toward the capital that were often informed by generational differences.[52] The same was true of nineteenth- and twentieth-century nobles. In 1888 the princesse Cécile de Béarn wrote to her son Henri: 'Grandfather cannot understand how one can live outside Paris and especially not in the Midi. I do not share his opinion at all.'[53] By contrast, in January 1909, the comtesse Adeline de Raymond received a note from her niece Sabine who yearned to experience Parisian social life: 'Bastia is especially dull this winter. Nobody dances, nobody has fun.'[54]

In commencing this history with the French Revolution, the archival documentation for the opening chapters contains signs of the State's transition to new administrative structures and territorial divisions. On 4 March 1790 Louis XVI signed the letters patent ordering the establishment of departments; shortly afterwards a committee within the Constituent Assembly began the awesome task of carrying out the work involved.[55] 'The creation of a new idea of France was the work of urban elites with a distinctive vision of spatial organization and institutional hierarchy. It was designed to give reality to two of their keywords: to "regenerate" the nation while cementing its "unity".'[56]

Provincial nobility, including the Brun de Montesquiou family in Gévaudan, did not have much to celebrate in this 'important victory of the new State'; they were far too preoccupied and alarmed. For them, and for many other people, older forms of spatial awareness, older hierarchies, and older province-based and territorial loyalties – including to languages or dialects – did not disappear. Yet nobles had no choice but to engage with the State, as well as with rural and urban inhabitants, for the recovery, defence, and maintenance of cultural property. Theirs was a long-term project, bequeathed by ancestors, to ensure descendants maintained the legal rights to ownership and enjoyment of patrimony.

One may always regret what has been destroyed or lost. The great fortune for historians, however, is that so much archival evidence has survived about how successive generations of nobility fared on their estates. It is to that evidence, of destruction and survival in a gradually modernising France, which we now turn.

Notes

1 'Petition au Conseil de cinq cents', November 1793, in AD Lozère 7J/7 Fonds de Saint Amand.

2 The term *carte* refers to a measure of grain or, in some regions, a measure of other products such as wine or salt. In Lozère one *carte* of chestnuts was equivalent to 30.98 litres. See '*carte*' in M. Lachiver, *Dictionnaire du monde rural* (Paris, 2006). On the persistence of barter by the muleteers of Gévaudan in the nineteenth century see E. Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France 1870–1914* (London, 1976), p. 35.

3 'Mémoire de ce que nous avons perdu' in AD Lozère 7J/7 Fonds de Saint Amand.

4 R. Forster, 'The survival of the nobility during the French Revolution', *Past and Present* 37 (1967), 71–86; D. Higgs, *Nobles in Nineteenth-Century France: The Practice of Inegalitarianism* (Baltimore, 1987), pp. 51–4; L. Boisnard, *La Noblesse dans la tourmente 1774–1802* (Paris, 1992); P. Bourdin (ed.), *Les Noblesses françaises dans l'Europe de la Révolution* (Rennes and Clermont-Ferrand, 2010).

5 'Etat et mémoire des pertes' in AD Lozère 7J/7 Fonds de Saint Amand.

6 R. Encinas de Munagorri, *Introduction générale au droit* Revised ed. (Paris, 2006), pp. 77–80, 85–91.

7 C. Nougaret and P. Even (eds), *Les Archives privées: manuel pratique et juridique* (Paris, 2008), pp. 21–8, 178–9; *Code du patrimoine: partie legislative* (Paris, 2004).

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