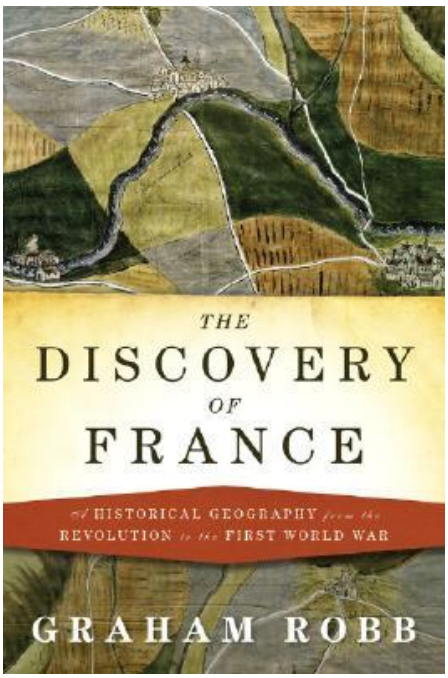

The Discovery of France: A Historical Geography from the Revolution to the First World War

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While Gustave Eiffel was changing the skyline of Paris, large parts of France were still terra incognita. Even in the age of railways and newspapers, France was a land of ancient tribal divisions, prehistoric communication networks, and pre-Christian beliefs. French itself was a minority language.Graham Robb describes that unknown world in arresting narrative detail. He recounts the epic journeys of mapmakers, scientists, soldiers, administrators, and intrepid tourists, of itinerant workers, pilgrims, and herdsmen with their millions of migratory domestic animals. We learn how France was explored, charted, and colonized, and how the imperial influence of Paris was gradually extended throughout a kingdom of isolated towns and villages.*The Discovery of France* explains how the modern nation came to be and how poorly understood that nation still is today. Above all, it shows how much of France—past and present—remains to be discovered.

The Discovery of France: A Historical Geography from the Revolution to the First World War Details

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From Reader Review The Discovery of France: A Historical Geography from the Revolution to the First World War for online ebook

Jeremy says

D'habitude quand vous lisez une histoire de France du XIXème siècle, vous avez droit à un cours sur l'alternance politique entre Empire et restauration puis république et de nouveau une dictature pour finir avec la Commune et la Seconde République. On vous parle de grands hommes, de l'émergence des nationalismes ainsi que d'industrialisation, de colonies et d'avancées technologiques.

Dans cette histoire de France, on sort des sentiers battus. On arpente les petits villages où l'on ne parlait pas encore le français. On découvre l'émergence du tourisme thermal dans les Pyrénées. Nous sommes contés les stratégies familiales pour gérer les bouches trop nombreuses dans les régions typiques. On prend connaissance de la découverte d'un pays par un peuple qui n'avait pas les moyens de quitter son canton et qui s'ouvre à la France en l'espace de quelques décennies.

Bref, c'est le XIXème siècle comme vous ne l'avez jamais lu.

Rick Skwiot says

According to author Graham Robb, a scant few hundred years ago France consisted largely of suspicious and superstitious pagan peasants who spoke discrete tongues (none of which was French), ate unpalatable and malnutritious food, and seldom ventured beyond a day’s walk of their homes. (Even today, Robb notes, some 86 percent of French people have never flown on an airplane.)

However, in the intervening years France has somehow come to be known as a rational, monolinguistic land of art, sophistication, learning, the highest gastronomic achievement and a chic worldliness, all to the delight of tourists. That is, the world has adopted a limited Parisian view of the nation—which, as Robb documents, still deviates from the provincial reality.

In “The Discovery of France: A Historical Geography from the Revolution to the First World War” (though the book extends beyond those two events), Robb presents a witty and well researched exposé of our misapprehensions about France. That research includes his bicycling some 14,000 miles along the back roads that crisscross the country and “four years in the library” delving into its art, artifacts, folkways, physical history and literature. The result is a compelling portrait of the daily lives of the French before the advent of high-speed trains, superhighways, cinema verité and tourisme.

Gwern says

Discovery of France charts the transition of the region covered by modern France into the unified cultural/political/geographic entity of today. This is incredibly interesting because from our perspective, we have forgotten (if we ever knew) what went into the process of taking the thousands of villages and regions

differing in all sorts of ways, and crushing them into the relatively homogeneous high-tech culture of today - unifying languages, political systems, forms of transportation, religion, and so on. A theme throughout is Scott's legibility (*Seeing Like A State*); Robb gives all sorts of examples demonstrating local knowledge, specialized information, and resistance to outsiders.

Often people dramatically underestimate this. It's easy to assume that the vast nation-states like China or America just sort of came into existence naturally, but this overlooks the amount of effort Chinese/American governments/organizations have put into unification, in aspects ranging from stamping out as many languages and other cultures as possible to simplifying existing languages (particularly striking in China) to enforcing standardized units & measures (encouraging cash crops is a good way) to standardized national educational curriculum inculcating patriotism and common beliefs. You may not think that they are 'unified', but they are far more unified than they used to be - contrast the original 13 American colonies to how large America is now, or look at historical maps of Han China with the current boundaries, and think about all the cultural, linguistic, political, and economic differences that used to exist, and how many of, say, the languages are now extinct. (To say nothing of the peoples... Tibet and the American Indians come to mind as examples unique only for the documentation and notice taken of their particular instance.) The process of homogenization and simplification happens in many large countries, for easily-understood reasons such as the convenience of the state. Besides Robb & Scott, some views of this process can be found in Fukuyama's *The Origins of Political Order* for China. (You could also get a bit of the American process out of Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* by looking at various incidents in the right way, but that's too polemical & focused on other topics for me to really recommend.)

This may sound like a very grand theme, but Robb is able to give so many fascinating examples that one forgets the underlying demonstration and just basks in the knowledge of how the past is a very foreign country. (As I mention in my review of *The Dark Side of the Enlightenment: Wizards, Alchemists, and Spiritual Seekers in the Age of Reason*, a sense of distance and alienation is one of the things I prize most in historical works - while there is continuity, continuity is easy to find and it is beyond easy to portray the past as proceeding Whiggishly and comprehensibly into the present, obscuring all the ways in which we are profoundly alien from the past.)

Where do I start... The extraordinary fact that until the 20th century, French was only a plurality language in France? The stiltwalking shepherds? The horrifying bits about drunken dying babies being carted to Paris by the 'angel-makers'? The packs of smuggler dogs who smuggled goods in and out of France for their human masters? (Or the dog-powered factories?) The forgotten persecution of the cagot caste? The Parisian who sold maggots to fisherman, which he raised in his closet on a pile of cat & dog roadkill collected from the streets? The wars between rival villages? The commuting peasants who thought nothing of a 50 mile walk? The strange twists of fate that lead regions to specialize in particular wares? The villages of cretins or families who regard a cretinous child as a gift from god? The mapping of the hidden communication networks that spread rumor at the speed of a horse? The corvée system of road-building, so inefficient at points that transporting the materials to build 1 more meter of a road could destroy more than 1 meter of that same road? All of this and much more is to be found in Robb's dizzying tour of France, past and present, a tour I found as entertaining as educational.

I made per-chapter excerpts of parts I liked:

prologue, ch1
ch2
ch3
ch4
ch5
ch6

ch7
ch8
Interlude
ch9-10
ch11-12
ch13
ch14
ch15
ch16
ch17 & epilogue

Marc says

Graham Robb brings a wonderful tour d'horizon of France between 1750 and 1914. Not the France that we usually know with its Sun Kings, enlightened Philosophers and Corsican emperors, but quite the contrary of it: the closed village communities, with their incomprehensible dialects, their superstition and their distrust of all what was strange, and with their precarious survival economy. Robb stresses that France in this period was no unit, French was spoken in a limited area and by a limited group of people, the enlightenment and modernity were still not so far penetrated and the residents of most parts of France saw themselves not as Frenchmen. But he also outlines how very gradually the modernity broke through, ' discovered ' the country (hence the title), conquered and colonized it. It is clear that Robb wanted to correct the glorious image that the French present of themselves. Thus this is truly revisionist historiography, and he may have exaggerated a bit in the other direction. Anyway, the French blamed him for that (this book was only published in French in a very limited edition, and French editorialists crucified Robb). As it goes, the truth probably is somewhere in between.

Tamara says

This is a delightfully eclectic book, with piles and piles of surprising information about just-pre-modern daily life. The way distance shifted between eras and technologies, the way food and work and money functioned or didn't in this vast landscape before the state came along to make sense of them, the oddness and diversity of the way people moved and lived before, well, more practical universal solutions became available. It's a bit meandering and tended to lose my attention for weeks at a time, but overall perfectly fascinating.

Hester says

This is one of my favorite books ever. It changed the way I viewed history and the way I viewed France. Every page was surprising and exhausting. Did you know they had dog-powered machinery in France? Where the dogs trained other dogs how to use it? That one of the first geographers of France was killed as a sorcerer? That there were orgies in Notre Dame? That Paris has always been a polyglot city, since people from different provinces did not speak the same language? That the government did not know about France's largest canyon until a little before the turn of the century?
A beautifully written, important book that covers French history ignored by the Parisian elite. Fantastic.

This book also has a special place in my heart since this was the last Christmas present my father gave me and the last book we really discussed before he died. My brother and I took turns reading it to him in the hospital.

Sense of History says

It is clear to me that Robbs with this book wanted to offer a correction on the image that the French put up of themselves as a nation that already in the 18th century laid the foundations of modernity, that during and after the French revolution this modernity penetrated in all sections of French society, and at the same time France spread this light of modernity across the world. This myth has been punctured long ago, not least by French historians themselves, both by the Annales-school as by the school of social historians in the years 1950 and 1960.
But that picture apparently still is not adjusted outside of France. And so Robb can do his thing and show that France in the 19th century and early 20th century was not that unified and centralized and, above all, was not that modern state-of-the-art country it liked to present itself. I have to say: Robb does so with much gusto. He quotes elaborately from travel reports and other ego-documents and astounds us with lots of gasping examples and some surprising photographs. This book is another illustration that the history of little man can offer a very different perspective than that of great personalities and institutions.
But there also is some comment to make on Robb's presentation. I certainly have the impression that he strictly selected his sources in compliance with his intent, and consequently that he deliberately opted for a tunnel vision. As said his method supplies a nice picture of the pre-modern France (an image that may not be so much different from the situation in other West European countries around the same period), but nevertheless we must keep in mind that this is a distortion. The reality probably was much more complex and dynamic, an interactive combination of pre-modern and modern trends. I'm not going to claim that Robb ignores this, certainly not, but his focus lies on just one end of the spectrum.

Jan-Maat says

This isn't an armchair travel book, it's an armchair time travel book. The use of the singular in the title is potentially misleading. It is the result of the author's discovery of France on bicycle and in the archives (but not both at the same time I hasten to add to reassure any anxious library lovers). It is also a book about how many times and how many ways France has been discovered.

So we have the two men who tried to discover the boundary between the Langue d'Oc and the Langue d'Oil, one died and the other lost an eye in the process (I'm not sure if the discovery of the Benrather line was quite so dangerous). We have the explorers of caves and caverns, Cassini's mapmakers (one of whom is murdered while surveying in the first pages of the book), the first tourists and the sudden attention of the Parisian anthropologists to the supposedly backwards and primitive types to be found in the countryside, though to their chagrin they found that Breton skulls were larger than supposedly superior Parisian types.

Then there are other discoveries. The discovery of the world beyond their villages made by generations of migrant workers who spent years working in different cities with people from particular areas dominating certain trades, and the discovery of a notion of being French thanks to universal education, mass literacy and the bicycle.

The most profound discovery is that of the pre-modern ways of life that existed. A town's bread baked once a week, or harder yet all the year's baking done at once with the hard loaves softened in water, milk or wine

throughout the year. People living a subsistence lifestyle slowing down into a semi hibernation during the winter months, the lives of those for whom going barefoot was a more sensible way of crossing fields than wearing shoes or the stilt wearing shepherds whose way of life disappeared with the coming of modernity.

Tying the book together is the discovery of long standing prejudices. The book opens with the still mysterious persecution of the Cargots and ends with that of people of North African descent stuck in high rise suburbs.

You are left with a sense of the mass of differing ways of life, habits of speech and economic networks that is hidden by the neatness and precision of a modern map.

Djewesbury says

This is a fascinating book, full of the perfectly unexpected. It is possibly the best piece of social history I've ever read. The accepted version of modern French history relies on a linear story of gradual and natural centralisation: the organic creation of a nation conceived of, in its essential form several hundreds of years ago, and striving ever since towards its own self-realisation. Robb overturns this view and demonstrates again and again that it is a miracle that modern France ever came into existence at all. Little more than a hundred and fifty years ago, the vast majority of the 'French' were quite unaware that they were French at all, did not speak the French language and had never travelled outside their region. The latter is hardly unusual, but when one adds to this the fact that large areas of France remained unmapped, and completely unknown to outside eyes, until the mid-nineteenth century; that official knowledge of some regions did not extend fifty metres from the side of the main coach road; and that travel of any kind was tortuously slow and uncomfortable, we can start to see the French state as a rather more modern invention than we would ever have supposed. Indeed, it would be fair to say that it didn't really begin to emerge in a recognisable form until the educational and other reforms of the Third Republic, in the 1870s.

Robb treats his subject in themed chapters which are not straightforwardly arranged in an overarching chronology, although that chronology does frame the book as a whole (and the contemporary conclusion provides a fitting point of departure for further investigation). Unlike other 'themed' histories (I'm thinking particularly of Peter Ackroyd's long, dry 'biography' of London, which often reads like an unedited, self-indulgent list of lists) Robb's succeeds in giving life to the many dimensions of his subject, in order that we might start to view it more convincingly as a whole. He considers the many cultural, social and technological changes that might be thought of as central to a history such as this - innovations in cartography and in transport, regional identities, linguistic and topographical diversity, and so on. But he is also keen to reclaim those dimensions that often pass out of the record, the historiographical gaps and silences: in a chapter describing the passage of the year in pre-mechanised rural France, he asks his modern readers to try and comprehend the inactivity that dominated more than half of the agricultural year. How, he wonders, can history-writing describe the sheer boredom of these months? To eke out provisions between the reaping of one harvest and the sowing of the next, ordinary people would, more or less literally, hibernate, and the countryside would fall quiet throughout the whole of winter, but nowhere in existing literature is this really adequately described. In his desire to make tangible the pace of actual life, Robb evokes both Henri Lefebvre and E.P. Thompson, whose 'Making of the English Working Class' sometimes seems to be a template for this book (and who also famously concentrated on the birth of modern conceptions of time).

Other reviews have quoted at length the startling facts that Robb excavates, and which he stitches through his narrative: the stilted shepherds of the Landes, the whistling language of the Pyrenees, and so on. All these certainly provide colourful illumination but the book is ultimately far more than just a collection of wonderful details. Robb is a sensitive and rigorous investigator, but whilst he makes the synthesis of

hundreds of sources appear effortless, he never takes his eye off the larger story - the emergence of a contemporary France which is as much made by this collection of neglected, intimate, disparate and often suppressed histories, as by the epic, forward-thrusting narrative it more often tells of itself.

Carrie Chappell says

Robb's theory, so far as I can see it, turns on the notion that in the process of discovery one eventually knows destruction as well. As soon as an area is mapped, charted, understood by its resources, then there are the people wanting to move to it, use it all up, and charge others to see it. Then, it becomes a politic, and whether it's tourism or daily life, a whole space is lost to what was either found by people looking to expand their reach or some gentle ego wishing to understand better his/her world.

In addition, so much of this book for me was connected to larger concerns around history-telling, the differing spaces that scholars, politicians, and the public inhabit in thinking of their past and present. For me, the book clarified a sense I had already—that history is usually more laden with stories of erasure than preservation. But then also the reminders that 'erasure' and 'preservation' are necessary to progress but dangerous to our senses of origin, to the life of certain populations. I guess now I want to think about what is important, as we look at the U.S. and the history she wants or needs to preserve or erase to make room for truer accounts, a long history of 'undiscovered' (<--no, that's not right?), of suppressed voices.

Paula says

Francophile that I am, I will never see France quite the same way after having read Robb's fascinating historical geography (or geographical history)of France up to WWI. Almost every page, in fact, almost every paragraph proves chock-full of interesting "facts" and authorial observations. There are chapters on languages (French having been a minority, i.e., "foreign" language a mere hundred years ago); animals (the "60 million Others" who also inhabited the Hexagon); maps, roads, travel in all its dimensions, "colonization" of the nation, tourism and more. I am already rereading this book with a map of France spread out on the dining room table in front of me as I do so (bearing in mind that to "find" all the locales Robb references really requires a palimpsest of old and new, large and small scale, linguistic, ethnographic & topographic maps, some of which may not even exist.
A few anecdotal gems:
"But if all the nicknames had been adopted, the map of France would now be covered with obscenities and incomprehensible jokes." (36)
"Human hibernation was a physical and economic necessity. Lowering the metabolic rate prevented hunger from exhausting supplies . . . Slowness was not an attempt to savour the moment." (76)
"The Virgin Mary was always more important than God . . . . He was no more important than a bishop." (130)
"The century's greatest expert on gossip and pre-industrial telecommunications, Honore de Balzac, suggested that rumour could travel at about 9 mph." (141)
"Any commemoration of European unity should remember the smugglers and pedlars who helped to keep the borders open." (152)
"Three years later the dogs of Paris had their own ambulance." (179)
"The shepherds of the Landes spent whole days on stilts, using a stick to form a tripod when they wanted to rest. Perched ten feet in the air, they knitted woollen garments and scanned the horizon for stray sheep. People who saw them in the distance compared them to tiny steeples and giant spiders." (243)
"France was repeatedly reconquered by French forces." (256)

"it is quite possible to travel from one end of the country to the other without . . . realizing that many of the landscapes that seem typically and eternally French are younger than the Eiffel Tower." (268)

Mackay says

Three point five stars, really, because I have the same sort of love/irritation with this book that Robb himself seems to feel for France.

This is not a traditional history--it's not the story of grand men doing great and terrible things, thinking new and surprising thoughts, or inventing the Culture of the West that France, in large part, created from the 17th century onward.

In some ways, it's a folk history, told through the small places in the heart of la France profonde. As such, it's a necessary and timely work. But often, Robb makes sweeping statements, which seem unsupported by the text (despite extensive, erudite notes and a full bibliography). He tends to let one example, one incident, speak for too much he is trying to explain ... which bends history as much as concentrating only on, say, Louis XIV or Napoleon or Jean Jacques Rousseau.

From reading this, I found I learned quite a bit, and the prose is beautiful and compulsively readable. But if this were the only history of France one read, one would be hard-pressed to figure out why France matters, how it led the Enlightenment, how it was the pivot of so much European history. Indeed, one would be staggered to learn that France mattered so much in fact as it has.

Yet, just reading about Cassini the Third's tremendous effort to map the whole of the Hexagon is a thrilling and moving story, and it's not the only one; the chapter that traces some legends and folktales is wonderful, too. So, love/irritation, because this book's story, and the story of France-in-the-World, seem nearly irreconcilable.

(As an aside, I wondered, at reading the encomiums from the press and reviews in the front of the volume, if the book won such praise, such awards, from the British because it made them feel so superior to their old enemy. Hmm.)

Chrissie says

This is a very nteresting book, but it is not at all how I imagined it after reading the Barnes & Nobles review. So beware! The facts presented in the book do NOT seem to be collected from the author's extensive bicycling throughout France, but rather reaped from extensive library research. It is primarily a history book, albeit filled with lots of interesting information. Lots of information on mapping. At times I was drowned by all the facts - a bit of editing would have definitely helped. You do NOT travel around France from area to area. The book does NOT systematicly study different regions. It does NOT attempt to point out the particular cultural characteristics of different regions nor how these characteristics differ from region to region. That is what I thought I would be getting! So yeah, I am a bit disappointed.

Elizabeth Theiss says

My deep love for France and the French is not based on deGaulle's France as a great nation but rather on its profound diversity of its language, culture, cuisine and mode de vie. Every region, every village, is unique because of its soil, what it grows, the history of its people. While the blender of globalization has been homogenizing culture in larger cities, one can still find villages that build the Feu de St. Jean at midsummer and watch the young men leap over the flames. Ancient dances, regional costumes and traditional dishes have not yet been forgotten.

Robb has given a depth of understanding to the people of France in historical and geographic context. He introduces old languages, transportation routes and customs borne of economic and religious necessity. How ancient pagan spirits were transformed into local saints was especially fascinating. In Plestin-les-Greves, a town in Brittany where I have spent considerable time, we had always wondered about St. Efflam, whose primitive likeness adorns a tiny local chapel in the woods (or "coat," in the local Breton language). Reportedly, Efflam left his wife on their wedding day to become a priest. He is not a Church-sanctioned saint but more on the order of a local saint, as is the case in rural areas across France.

Robb is a fine writer and an indefatigable researcher. His book is pure pleasure.

Kelly says

This was fantastically fascinating and so just my thing. Review posted in roundup of fantastic books I've read in the last few months on my blog: https://shouldacouldawouldabooks.com/...
