**Popular Revolts in Normandy**

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*The popular revolts of 1578-79 and 1586-89 in Normandy were triggered by an unruly military presence and the high level of royal fiscal exactions. Joan Davies shows how the revolts were exploited by the nobility in their struggle with Henri III, who met the threat thus posed with force.*

How can the popular revolts during the French Civil Wars of the sixteenth century best be understood? Has the emphasis on religion served to underestimate the link between popular discontents of the sixteenth century and those of the seventeenth? Were the risings spontaneous challenges to royal policies, resisting the presence of troops the burdens of war fiscality, the toleration or repression of Protestantism? Were they inspired by nobles ready to use religion or other sources of grievances to furnish themselves with a following? If not instigated by the nobility, could popular movements be captured by them? There may well be as many answers as questions and it is obvious the more research is needed. Nonetheless, an examination of two risings in Normandy, in 1578–9 and 1586–9, does shed some light on these problems as well as focusing attention on Henri III's apparently almost congenital inability to pacify his kingdom.

Normandy had been, throughout the sixteenth century, traditionally the single most highly taxed province in France, providing at least a quarter of main direct tax, the *taille* ; the tightening of the fiscal vice which appears to have begun after 1576 would obviously have considerable repercussions here. Provincial particularism was also a force to be reckoned with, despite the relative proximity to Paris and the lack of a particularly distinctive dialect or language: well into the seventeenth century memories of ancient independence (and not so ancient, since the English had ruled in the fifteenth century) and appeal to privileges enshrined in the *Charte aux Normandes* could exert a powerful influence over the people as was demonstrated during the 1639 Nu-Pieds revolt. Normandy had its own *parlement* at Rouen, as well as the fiscal courts, the Cour des Aides and Chambre des Comptes, and its own distinctive customary law. Ostensibly guaranteeing the financial independence of the province which was conceded in the Charte, the Estates of the province met regularly to 'consent' to the crown's demands for taxes and to decide on the distribution of the sums between the administrative subdivisions of the *elections*. Even before Calvin's mission to France in the late 1550s, Protestantism had made considerable headway in Normandy; Calvinist congregations remained numerically strong at least until the massacres following St Bartholomew's Eve in Paris and, even after the decline of urban churches, seigneurial Calvinism remained significant.

Dissent in Normandy seems first to have been voiced in a legitimate manner in the *cahier* of the Estates which met in November 1578. This included requests for a reduction of taxation to the level obtaining under Louis XII, the suppression of excessive numbers of venal offices, and maintenance of provincial privileges which had been infringed by evoking lawsuits to Paris: that this was not an -entirely disinterested protest drawn up largely by those traditionally exempt from taxation is indicated by one article which complained of impositions levied also on the clergy and nobility and which were said to be going straight to private individuals not the royal treasury. This allegation may refer to the role of financiers who, as in the seventeenth century, were heavily involved in farming taxes and advancing credit to the crown at high interest rates. On the other hand, it may have been a veiled attack on the *mignons*, Henri III's favourites, who were said to have received the 20,000 *ecus* which Rouen had paid to the King in June 1578 in order to avoid the greater expense of providing a formal celebration of his entry to the city. The Estates also protested against the marauding soldiery, especially prevalent since Easter; a spokesman for the first estate, Clerel, canon of Rouen Cathedral, eloquently depicted the sufferings of the starving, ragged peasantry still pillaged by the troops even after they had paid the inflated *taillon* (the tax for the army). This complaint does appear a little odd since it is difficult to see why Normandy should have been affected so badly when the sixth civil war had ended in September 1577 and had, in any case, been fought south of the Loire.

From the first, however, an understanding of the revolts of 1578-9 cannot be divorced from the activities of the King's younger brother and heir presumptive, Francois, Duke of Anjou and Alencon. In the spring of 1578 he had begun negotiations with the States General of the Netherlands to support their revolt against Spain and he had started to recruit troops; he had particular hopes of the Norman nobility and, in an eighteen month period from this date, 40,000 men were reported to have passed through the province. It is also worth noting that part of the prince's apanage lay in lower Normandy and he tended to retreat there when on bad terms with his brother as was, indeed, the norm. This may explain why, although earlier dukes of Alencon who were sons or brothers of the monarch had held the governorship of Normandy, Henri III at this period had divided the province between three lieutenant-governors. The division may have diminished royal authority in that they all had local connections and may have become too involved in local feuds: for example, between February 1578 and May 1579, Neufchatel-en-Bray was garrisoned on the orders of La Mailleraye in order to protect a relative against the threat of a popular rising and, as the troops could not be paid from the royal treasury, this cost the town over 12,000 *livres*.

Henri yielded to the demands of the Estates in large measure in February 1579, agreeing not to press for tax arrears, promising to reduce the number of venal offices recently created (twenty-two separate edicts creating new offices had been issued in the summer of 1578), to disband troops and finally to confirm the Norman charter. He also agreed to permit another, extraordinary meeting of the Estates in March, but he sent the duke of Montmorency to Rouen to oversee and curb its activities. The ostensible success of this constitutional opposition has to be seen, however, in the light of similar and apparently closely co-ordinated resistance from the Estates of Burgundy and Brittany and unrest in other provinces including Auvergne, Dauphine, Picardy and Champagne; the King was thought at first to see the hand of the Guise family and the Holy League behind all this, but by 1579 his suspicions, at least in the case of Normandy, had focused on Anjou. He sent his trusted servant Pomponne de Bellievre to investigate reports that Anjou was offering his protection to the Estates and creating some sort of league amongst the nobility; there was little evidence to support the first allegation but the second obviously related to recruitment for Flanders. Though Bellievre's report was essentially negative, it was inherently probable that Anjou may have tried to profit by, if, he did not create, the general unrest even though his own activities were contributing (as much as the King's policies) to the miseries of the people.

Though Henri III had temporarily bought off the 'legitimate' resistance with his concessions, the Estate's warnings about the despair of the peasantry were well founded. In the summer, the people of Martragny and two or three other parishes near Caen rose up against the tax collectors and, in their wretchedness, even though unarmed they attacked some troops. Although/the only lives lost seem to have been amongst the rebels, the King reacted sharply and sent one of his *maitres des requetes*, Antoine Seguier (uncle of the Chancellor Pierre who ferociously suppressed the NuPieds revolt in 1639-40), to investigate and punish the rising. Seguier's report only confirmed and reinforced the requests made by the Estates regarding the general poverty and despair but it also went further and singled out the grave inequities in the levy of the *taille*. Those responsible for allocating the tax burden lived in the towns which they systematically undercharged by 50 per cent or even 75 per cent; then in the countryside this excessive sum was corruptly assessed as the sergeants who levied the tax kept a third for themselves, the village elites took advantage of their position to shift the burden on to the poor and, finally a problem that seems to have been endemic in Normandy, *faux-nobles* were escaping the fiscal net and hence increasing the weight on the peasants, who fell into debt as a consequence and were then forced to sell their land to these same impostors at well below the market value. Seguier's role was, in some respects, analogous to that of a seventeenth-century intendant; could he, like his successor, be accused of vilifying the traditional nobility and blaming popular unrest directed against central government on noble incitement? It is possible that some degree of popular unrest was inspired or encouraged by the nobility given the protests from the Estates which could be fitted into the historian Roland Mousnier's schema of a society bound together by vertical loyalties rather than divided into horizontal interest groups. Seguier's report does not, however, lend much support to that theory, though it is clear that Henri III wanted to establish some connection between the peasant rising and his fears of noble leagues. Even if one were to accept the possibly dubious argument about the ambivalent role. of the intendant, this would not apply in Seguier's case since, apart from being a royal servant, he was also a client of one of the noble lieutenants of Normandy, Francois d'O, who was himself a royal favourite; and Seguier's diagnosis is confirmed by the facts that concern about the inequalities in the levy of the *taille* persisted (royal commissioners were sent out again for this reason in 1598-9 and intendants in the next century continued to remark on the problem) and that royal officials investigated noble status in areas of Normandy eleven times between 1461 and 1666 in an attempt to weed out illegitimate claims.

Why did the King react so sharply to this relatively minor incident, insignificant in comparison with widespread tax strikes and revolt in the Vivarais or Dauphine at the same period? Greater proximity to Paris, fear of losing control of a wealthy province obviously played their part, but Henri was not prepared to see the rising as a spontaneous reaction to economic crisis. He was convinced that three nobles, La Rocheguyon, Chantelou and Pont-Bellenger, were inciting the troubles and using the common-weal as a pretext. There may have been some truth in his suspicions which were endorsed by the usually well-informed Protestant historian and contemporary, La Popeliniere. Chantelou and Pont-Bellenger had represented the nobility of the *bailliages* of Evreux and Caen respectively at the 1578 Estates and the King's decision to arrest all three evoked strong protest from the November 1579 Estates which claimed they had been acting in the interests of the province. This commonwealth rhetoric must be called in doubt, however, by a consideration ot La Rocheguyon's connections; whereas his fellow rebels were simple provincial nobles Henri de Silly had much more elevated associates. His god-parents were Henri II, Diane de Poitiers and the Constable Montmorency, he was brought up at court and, at the age of twenty-two, in 1574 was created Comte de La Rocheguyon by Charles IX. Though he took part in Henri III's coronation and was given a company in the elite heavy cavalry, the gendarmerie, by the late 1570s La Rocheguyon had become alienated from the King apparently because the heiress Jeanne de Cosse-Brissac whom he had hoped to wed had instead been married to one of the King's favourites, Saint-Luc, in 1578; furthermore, his younger brother Antoine, Comte de Rochepot was one of Anjou's confidants and he himself had accompanied the prince on the expedition to Mons in the summer of 1578. In other words, he was a typical malcontent.

Although Seguier failed to turn up direct evidence of La Rocheguyon's collusion with the peasant rebels, the governor of Rauen reported that he was trying to persuade the people there to resist royal taxation. It was even rumoured that there was some sort of assassination plot against the King himself and it was at least true that there had been some murderous duels between the *mignons*, Guise's followers and those of Anjou which created a sinister atmosphere at court; once again, however, hard evidence against La Rocheguyon is lacking. The news from Rauen was enough, however, for Henri to order the *grand prevost* (father of Cardinal Richelieu) to arrest La Rocheguyon and the others, and also Fervaques, another follower of Aujou. Richelieu seems just to have missed his prey, in late August. They were said to have been in lower Normandy, trying to raise Brittany as well, but then it was reported that La Rocheguyon and Chantelou had fled to the former's chateau of Commercy, on the borders with Lorraine. The King was sufficiently incensed to order marshal de Matignon into the field despite the danger of provoking further unrest in Champagne by the presence of these troops.

The crisis, in fact, slowly evaporated. In the winter of 1579-80, the dissident Norman nobles certainly negotiated in Lorraine both with the Guises and with the German Protestant Prince John Casimir of the Palatinate but nothing concrete emerged, sinister though such developments were. Henri III seems to have been won gradually to his mother's viewpoint: Catherine de Medici had initially counselled caution when he first tried to arrest the nobles and she had then doubted the wisdom of sending troops against them as this could only add to financial problems. In late November she went to Normandy and saw her youngest son there. Anjou assured his mother that he would reject all overtures from the rebels and endorsed her arguments for *douceur*; it was suggested that his Chamberlain, Rochepot, should be used to transmit promises of royal clemency to his brother La Rocheguyon. Catherine also tried to influence the states which were once again in session at Rouen. She was alarmed because relative few nobles were attending, because reluctance to agree to fiscal demands persisted and because of reports that the Protestants were restive; indeed, she feared that the dissident nobility was prepared to join the Protestants, just at the point when the Prince of Conde seized La Fere in Picardy and thus signalled further hostilities in the civil wars. Under these circumstances, she warned the King that he would soon have a general revolt on his hands if he did not relieve his people and instead turn once again to the financiers and use credit rather than taxes to solve his immediate problems. Broadly speaking, Catherine's advice was followed: the malcontents were forgiven and La Rochegyoin seems to have returned to grace, marrying another heiress and being created a chevalier of the prestigious order of the Saint Esprit before his death in 1586, and tax demands seem to have been temporarily moderated for a few years.

The root causes of the troubles in Normandy had not, however, been dealt with and they began to surface again from about 1586, even without the stimulus of alienated nobles. This was the phase of popular unrest known as the Gautier rebellion, probably because it centred on the community of La Chapelle-Gautier or just possibly because *gautier* was the old Norman word for an inhabitant of the *bocage* or wooded areas of lower Normandy. It is tempting to see some continuity between the two periods but in the present state of research this can only be inferred with caution; nonetheless it may be significant that the family of La Haye held part of the fief of La Chapelle-Gautier and that it lay in the *bailliage* of Evreux which Jean de La Haye, seigneur de Chantelou represented in 1578.

There were other parallels with the 1678-9 troubles: in 1586, as in 1578, Henri III tried to solve his financial difficulties by manipulating the sale of offices. Claude Groulart, first president of the Rouen *parlement*, protested strongly and was summoned to court to explain himself, though he had already demonstrated his essential loyalty in refusing a popular riot against tax increases and the arrival of troops under the new governor Joyeuse in May 1585. Simultaneously with Groulart's departure for Paris about eighty villages in Lower Normandy used to pay the taille. Once again popular discontent was voiced and amplified at elite levels: Groulart's speeches at the commencement of the *parlement*'s sessions in 1586 and 1587 both referred to the devastation caused by the excesses of the soldiery, whilst the Estates claimed that the air alone was free of tax. The King was well aware of the unrest and tax strikes as his correspondence with the lieutenants of Normandy during 1586-7 illustrates, but he did little beyond urge them to repress such dissent. There were no more missions of *maitre des requites* as events had moved beyond the possibility of reform with the rise to dominance of the Holy League in 1585. Henri now seems to have been as much concerned with the reported mobilisation of Huguenot gentlemen as with peasant rebellion. This was seriously aggravated by the worsening economic climate: on top of ever increasing fiscal demands, the harvest failed disastrously and starvation was only averted by imports of Baltic grain in 1587 - though whether this was distributed outside the towns is another question.

The fundamental cause of the Gautiers' revolt seems, nonetheless, to have been the presence of troops; Henri III would have done well to have heeded the advice given by members of the Norman dynasty of Harcourt first to Edward III and latterly in 1944 that "*on ne fait pas Ia guerre en Normandie'*'. According to one account, La Chapelle-Gautier itself first rebelled in protest against the rape of one of its women by soldiers. With more generalised war, the protest spread into Perche and Maine by the autumn of 1587 and in January 1588 the peasantry were able to force the troops of the Duke of Epernon to retreat to Chartres. Throughout the first months of 1588 the King continued to urge his lieutenants to arrest and punish the leaders of the rebellion but then in May his own authority was challenged by the Holy League, the Duke of Guise and the Paris Sixteen in the Day of the Barricades. Having been forced out of his capital, Henri eventually arrived in Rouen and made some conciliatory moves towards reducing taxes. But these superficial gestures were seen as such and, after he had organised the assassinations of the Guises at Blois in December 1588, Rouen declared for the League. Only now, it seems, did the nobility once again seek to turn peasant unrest to their advantage. The conflict between the League and the crown split the province and the League commander, the Comte de Brissac, finding himself short of troops turned to the peasant rebels. Thus between 10-12,000 Gautiers, who had risen against the presence of soldiers in the first place, now enrolled in the army of the League, apparently because it was opposed to the 'tyrant Henri de Valois' whose policies had been in part responsible for their misery. As yet, nothing is known of their leadership, but whoever they were, they had yielded to a counsel of despair: the leaguer gentlemen who placed themselves at their head led them to defeat at the siege of Falaise in April 1589 by the royalist Duke of Montpensier. Up to 3,000 were reported to have been cut in pieces while the survivors retreated to Vimoutier, Bernay and La Chapelle-Gautier itself; another 1,000 were killed at Vimoutier, all the rebels in Bernay were massacred but finally at La Chapelle they agreed to surrender, their parish priests interceded for them and Montpensier, remarking on the selfish folly of Brissac and other nobles, agreed to let them disperse in peace so long as they returned to the cultivation of their fields. This appears to have been the end of popular rebellion in Normandy at least in the sixteenth century, though many of the themes we have looked at would reappear in the seventeenth.

How should the rebellions be interpreted? There was noble involvement, but it seems to have been opportunistic, exploiting pre-existing unrest for ends that were either personal or factious; on the other hand there is only slight evidence of attacks on seigneurs. During the Gautier revolt, in the villages of Saint Sulpice-sur-Rille and Chandei in the *bailliage* of Alencon, the people were first encouraged to take up arms by captains and seigneurs who claimed the revolt was in defence of the Catholic faith. The captains, though, were of humble origin, such as ordinary soldiers or blacksmiths and quarrels developed with the seigneurs, quickly followed by murders. At this point the *cures* took a hand, reinforcing the essentially Catholic nature of the rebellion, but also the parallels with the 1636-7 Croquant revolt investigated by Berce. They sounded the *tocsin* and the assembled peasantry hacked to death one of the seigneurs and his servant and dragged the bodies through the village to the marl-pit. The attack seems, however, to have been motivated less by grievances of an exploited peasantry than by conflict over the command and conduct of the rebellion; as Professor Salmon had found in his work on the Vivarais, the *seigneurs* were victims only when they became involved in military activities which were perceived as the most menacing threat to the social order. After the military, royal fiscal exactions came next on the list of triggers to revolt; the peasantry seems not to have been capable as yet of formulating the analysis made by Antoine Seguier of why the tax burden fell so heavily on them, so they attacked the humblest tax officials such as the sergeants, not the *tresoriers de France* who lived in the towns and bought up the countryside. By 1639, their descendants had perceived the accuracy of Seguier's diagnosis and, for their pains, were crushed by his nephew. Despite the climate of civil war, religion seems to have been a relatively insignificant stimulus. It would be interesting to know what influence Protestant *seigneurs* had over their peasantry but at present it is impossible even to speculate. The *cures* and the *tocsin* only appear in the Gautier revolt when it had already been captured by the League.

The development of resistance in Normandy reveals a good deal about the nature of Henri III's government. His response both to constitutional and popular protest reveals a protoabsolutist monarch constrained only by circumstances rather than any concept of a 'tempered' monarchy. His instinctive reaction seems to have been always to use force even when this was really impracticable. But a study of the Norman revolts also highlights the intractable problems which he faced: namely, his brother's disaffection and the growing menace of Guise ambition which led him perhaps to place his trust in possibly second-rate confidants and favourites, together with the overwhelming financial difficulties which were to be temporarily abated but never fundamentally solved before 1789.