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W. Gregory Monahan, Let God Arise: The War and Rebellion of the Camisards

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Critical Perspectives

Approches Critiques

W. Gregory Monahan,

LET GOD ARISE:

THE WAR AND REBELLION OF THE CAMISARDS,

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, 320 pages.

Let God Arise is the first account of the last French war of religion written in English. The revolt of the Camisards in the Cévennes Mountains between 1702 and 1710 has inspired a vast literature in France since the eighteenth century. Its compelling story of a peasant uprising fighting for the restoration of their freedom of religion was rapidly mythified into novels and operas in the nineteenth century; it inspired an award-winning film by René Allio in 1972 and continues to drive French historians to the present day. Despite the local scale of the conflict, its strategic importance and international resonance was in fact considerable in the wider context of the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1714). An English contribution on the subject was therefore much needed and long overdue. Monahan could have relied on the existing and abundant French historiography, but, instead, and much to his credit, his account is largely based on new archival

research. The book is also well-written, clearly structured and engaging.

The first chapters explore the socio-cultural distinctiveness of the people of the Cévennes within the wider Huguenot population. The Cévennes had converted massively to Calvinism in the early days of the Reformation, and its inhabitants remained uncompromising in their faith as the terms of the Edict of Nantes eroded in the second half of the seventeenth century (pp. 7-20). If the author passes too quickly, in my view, over the *dragonnades*, those military campaigns intended to convert local populations by force, the birth of an organized passive resistance in the early 1680s (pp. 21-63) provides an excellent background for the understanding of what would become the last French war of religion in the early eighteenth century. It retraces the formation of clandestine assemblies in the immediate aftermath of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, during

which charismatic lay prophets replaced those Huguenot ministers who had fled into exile abroad. Without their shepherds to guide them, the people of the Cévennes, or Cévenols, found relief in divine inspiration from the Holy Spirit and increasingly embraced martyrdom in response to their persecution.

Women in particular played a prominent role in this passive resistance, teaching psalms and biblical passages to their children, who were forcefully converted by Catholic priests. These “mothers of the Camisard rebellion” (pp. 19-20) became charismatic prophetesses after the revocation (pp. 55-56), and many would even die on the battlefield alongside their menfolk during the war of the Cévennes (pp. 91-93). By contrast, the silence of the local Protestant nobility proved conspicuous. Little was left of a Huguenot party since the Fronde; most nobles kept their distance from what was largely a revolt of young peasant-prophets (pp. 90-91). Those who did support them (among them, d’Aigaliers, d’Arzeliers, Miremont and Rochegude) only did so from abroad and rarely mentioned prophecy.

The motivations behind the war of the Cévennes raise further questions about the rise of absolutism in late seventeenth-century France. Drawing from French historians and in particular the work of Philippe Joutard, Monahan demonstrates that the Camisards did not take up arms for fiscal reasons, unlike the medieval *jacqueries*, but for the restoration of the Edict of Nantes (p. 83). Their rebellion is a case in point that political and religious dissent did not always go hand in hand, as it is too often assumed; for the Camisards always asserted their loyalty to Louis XIV and blamed instead their persecution on

the zeal of Basville, the king’s intendant in Languedoc. As the author shows, the repression was to a large extent managed locally, away from the absolutist rule of the Sun King (pp. 140-157). Versailles was not informed about the revolt until several months later and regarded it only as a temporary distraction in the midst of the War of the Spanish Succession (p. 115).

Monahan delivers a thorough and excellent account of the last French war of religion. Yet focusing on French primary sources only reveals one side of the story. The war of the Cévennes ought to be placed in the wider framework of European geopolitics, as it was at the time. Parallels were indeed made with the Protestant uprising led by Ferenc II Rákóczi against the Habsburgs in Hungary (1703-1711), and the historian Philippe Serisier’s work even revealed a degree of interaction between the two.

If chapter nine discusses the Camisards’ connections with Protestant countries, established for the most part after 1685 through the Huguenot diaspora, the role of the Anglo-Dutch coalition in particular remains underestimated by French historians to the present day. The war of the Cévennes was largely reported in the foreign press and debated in London coffee houses. Languedoc had maintained close ties with Protestant countries for a long time. Algernon Sidney, John Locke and Gilbert Burnet counted among the most famous English visitors to the region in the 1660s to 1680s, which no doubt influenced their views on religious toleration. The Glorious Revolution, as Monahan rightly points out (p. 34), had

a considerable impact in the Cévennes, perhaps more so than anywhere else outside of England, given its immediate proximity with the Principality of Orange, then a Protestant enclave in the heart of absolutist France. It was no coincidence that William III considered invading Languedoc with the support of the local population as early as 1689, nor that he supported François Vivens, the proto-Camisard leader who first promoted an armed rebellion in the late 1680s (p. 42).

It was during the insurrection itself that the commitment of Protestant nations towards the Cévennes can be best assessed. The first reports of the insurrection appeared in foreign diplomatic correspondence earlier than what is acknowledged here (pp. 158-162), virtually at the same time as they reached Versailles. The Anglo-Dutch coalition quickly realized the potential of supporting a civil war in France at a time when Louis XIV was fighting against the whole of Europe. Contrary to what Monahan and French historians claim (p. 182), foreign support did materialize and not only once, but on several occasions. A naval expedition reached the coast of Languedoc with weapons and ammunition in September 1703, but failed to establish contact with the rebels. The promise of imminent relief made by the Marquis de Miremont through his agent David Flotard was in fact kept, although the imprisonment of another agent, Tobie Rocayrol, a year later suggests that Flotard had never reached the Cévennes to fulfill his mission.

The Duke of Marlborough lost interest in the Cévennes after the failure of this expedition, but Anthonie Heinsius and

the Dutch authorities remained more sympathetic and renewed their support to the rebels. The dramatic capture of the rebels Catinat and Ravanel (pp. 228-234) was likewise indirectly caused by the Allies' support. Annoyed and frustrated that much of the money sent to the Cévennes did not seem to reach its destination, the Dutch government demanded receipts to be signed by all of the remaining Camisard leaders by 1705. The last standing chiefs, who from the beginning had waged a guerrilla war thanks to their coordinated attacks, were thus forced to meet in the same place to collect their funds, at which point they were betrayed, caught and executed. In addition, several competing plans elaborated by rival Huguenot diplomats and officers plagued the material support of foreign nations to the Cévennes throughout the conflict (pp. 163-167). An English fleet finally landed in Sète in July 1710 and sought to revive the rebellion, but by that time the Camisards had been virtually exterminated. Their last charismatic leader, Abraham Mazel, was killed three months later.

Several questions remain unanswered about this tumultuous episode in French history, one of these being the existence of the Treaty of Nîmes, allegedly signed between Jean Cavalier and Marshall de Villars in May 1704. According to Cavalier's memoirs, originally written in French around 1707, but published in English in 1726, the treaty restored the Edict of Nantes in Languedoc and constituted as a result a major victory for the Camisards. Monahan claims this treaty was invented by Cavalier as an excuse for his surrender (pp. 204-205). However, two copies of the treaty dated 11 May 1704

survive in archives in Leiden and London. They differ in their terms, but both grant freedom of religion in Languedoc and the release of all the prisoners and galley slaves since the revocation, and both bear the names of the main protagonists: Villars, Basville, La Lande, Cavalier and Billard. If it certainly was never implemented, the Treaty of Nîmes calls for further research.

Similarly, the nature of Cavalier's leadership has been much debated by historians. The author suggests that the Camisard leader renounced prophecy shortly before surrendering in 1704 as he negotiated his future military career (pp. 207-208). While plausible, this was by no means a definite move. If Cavalier would subsequently repudiate the notorious French Prophets in London, as the author correctly points out (pp. 238-239), he was in reality the first one to acknowledge the prophetic nature of the revolt upon his arrival in Holland in 1706, much to the dismay of his audience.

Cavalier's departure from France has likewise been a historiographical bone of contention. Did the Camisard leader meet Louis XIV after his surrender? Monahan, like most French historians, answers in the negative (pp. 215-217). The official story goes that the Sun King refused to receive the embarrassing baker's apprentice who had been defeating his troops for almost two years. Saint-Simon, Madame du Noyer and Voltaire claimed instead that Louis simply shrugged when he saw him,

but the latter two bore a personal grudge against Cavalier at the time. However, the correspondence of the Princess Palatine confirms the existence of a secret interview with the king in Versailles and describes the young rebel as very bold. The circumstances of Cavalier's departure from France require further examination, but he may well have achieved more than he has been credited for.

Let God Arise is an important book that will certainly be of interest to political and religious historians of the early modern period. It is in fact surprising that an English-language study of the war of the Cévennes did not see the light of day earlier, given its international significance at the time. In the end, Monahan ascribes the origins of the last French war of religion to "a failure to communicate" (p. 253) between Protestants and Catholics, of course, but also between their Occitan dialect and French, between prophetic and regal discourse. To this must be added chronic miscommunication on either side, between the Camisards and the Allies, on the one hand, and between Montpellier and Versailles, on the other. The rebellion may have been over by 1710, but it enabled the clandestine survival of Protestantism in France, while its prophetic spirit has survived abroad to the present day. Monahan's study therefore fills a considerable historiographical gap that will no doubt inspire a future generation of scholars.

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