

Montaillou and the History of Ordinary Folk

Jay Hancock

Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie divided historians into parachutists and truffle hunters.

Parachutists, from heights, see the sweep of armies across the plain, the collapse of empires, the waves of philosophy. Truffle hunters seek the rare and small: evidence for what it was really like to be alive and human long ago.

Le Roy Ladurie's most famous historical truffles came from a 14th-century detective case.

A mile up in the Pyrenees a village was harboring Albigenian heretics long after the Catholic church had suppressed them everywhere else.

Church prosecutors interrogated witnesses. Notaries wrote it all down. Not just highlights but something close to verbatim transcripts.¹ Not just evidence of doctrinal crimes but where the parties were, what they were doing, who was there, what else happened, what the weather was like.

“After we ate, I reveled and danced with the other young boys and girls of Prades and that night we dined, Alazaïs and I, at Bernard Tavernier's house. While we were eating, at dusk, Prades Tavernier arrived; he entered quickly into the house and took from his breast some dead squirrels and threw them down. Then he sat down with us and ate.”²

So [testified Guillemette Clergue](#), under oath, on Oct. 20, 1320. Le Roy Ladurie took hundreds of vignettes like this from dozens of witnesses to paint a Bruegel tableau of peasant life.

The name of the village was Montaillou. His ethnographic study by that title, published in 1975, surprised everybody by selling hundreds of thousands of copies. The book was a landmark in a field — call it [microhistory](#) or social history or time-travel eavesdropping — whose work still seems barely begun.

Le Roy Ladurie wasn't the only French scholar interested in ordinary people. Marc Bloch, who co-founded the social-scientific *Annales* school, said a good historian is like the legendary ogre. “Where he scents human flesh — he knows that there is his quarry.”

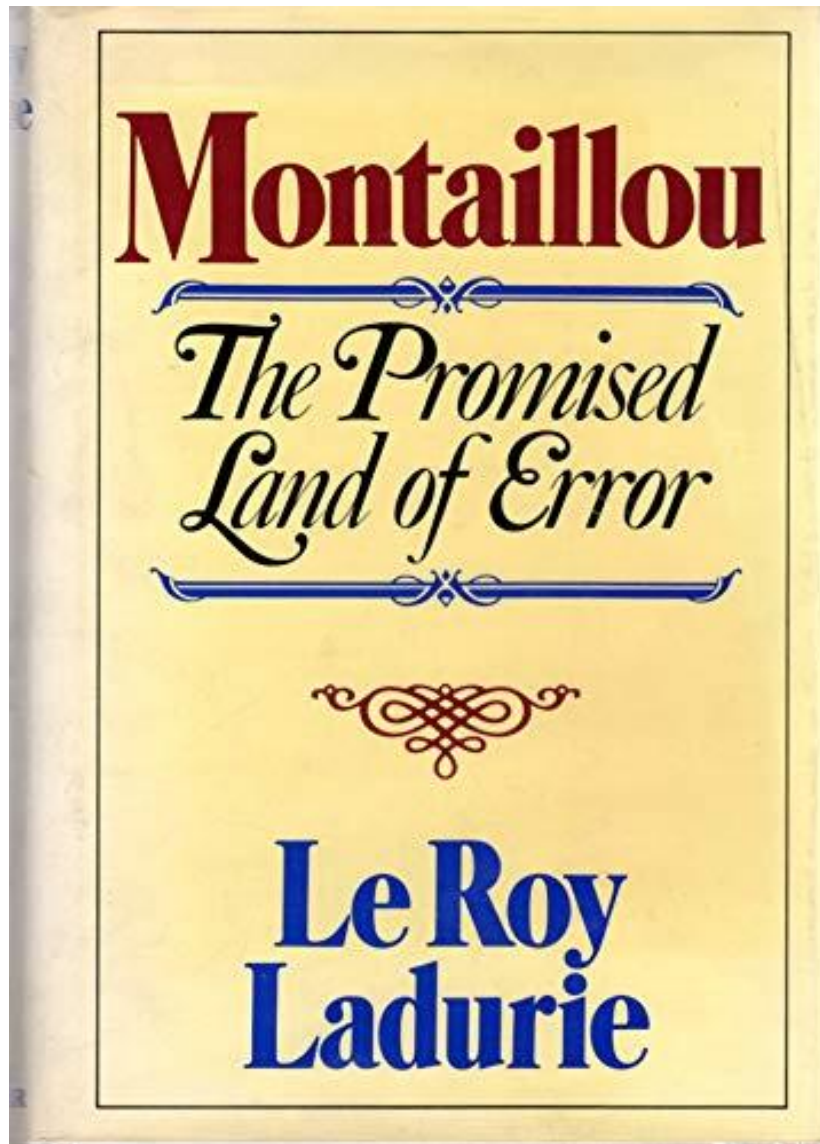
Bloch and other early *Annalists* were interested in “collective mentality,” the shared beliefs and outlooks of past societies. Le Roy Ladurie, who died in November 2023 at 94, was fascinated by the individuals.

¹ The deponents, almost all illiterate, spoke Occitan. The notaries seem to have interpreted it on the spot into written Latin, with occasional Occitan phrases. Often they read the transcript back to witnesses, retranslating into Occitan, to ensure accuracy.

² [Inquisition Records of Jacques Fournier](#), Bishop of Pamiers, France, 1318-1325. Translation from Latin and Occitan by Prof. Nancy Stork, San Jose State University.

“In those days it pleased me, and it pleased the priest, that he should know me carnally, and be known by me,” testified Graziade Lizier, one of many lovers of Pierre Clergue, the local Catholic priest and part of Montaillou’s dominant family. “And so I did not think I was sinning, and neither did he.”

The view from Montaillou is familiar to modern eyes but also alien. ([Today’s mayor](#) of Montaillou is a Clergue.) There were feuds, cliques and sexual affairs, humans acting human. But also magic, squalor and unimaginable isolation.



Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error* (1978)

“When you are walking, do not throw your arms and legs about carelessly, but keep your elbows well in, or you might knock a ghost over,” said Arnaud Gelis, a medium who could talk to the spirits. “Do not forget that we walk unwittingly among a multitude of ghosts.”

Montaillou was an island in time and space. Unable to read, the shepherds and farmers knew nothing but what they learned from elders and observation. They shared cottages with livestock.

Bathing was rare. Mutual delousing among family and friends was “a form of love, as it still is today among the monkeys,” Le Roy Ladurie liked to say.

To envision heaven and eternity, reckoned a farmer, one should imagine a huge house extending all the way to Toulouse — about a hundred miles away. Only one resident ever went to Paris, as far as the records show. When he got there he was burned at the stake.

One theme in the Montaillou story surfaces in every age: righteous busybodies identifying thought and speech crimes. Bishop Jacques Fournier, who later became Pope Benedict XII, was chief detective and interrogator. “*Très grand flic*,” says Le Roy Ladurie.

“Have you ever said that everything said or sung in the church is a lie?” Fournier, checking his informant files, [asked Pierre Sabatier](#). “Have you ever encouraged any person or persons not to believe?... Have you ever had commerce or relations with heretics or any individual heretic?”

It’s an interrogation ordeal, familiar from movies and novels. But modern people might not appreciate the flinty reality. This one happened, recorded by named, sworn scribes before a sworn witness in the bishop’s episcopal room in Pamiers, France, on Oct. 23, 1318.

Twentieth-century historians began realizing that political histories, even vivid ones with memorable characters, ignore most past lives. Monarchs, prelates and generals are not a good sample of humanity.

E.P. Thompson wanted to rescue farmhands, weavers and other artisans “from the enormous condescension of posterity,” as he wrote in *The Making of the English Working Class*.

Pierre Goubert learned from Bloch that “history was as much about peasants as kings, that the history of war is also the history of the soldiers who waged it,” he told [L’Histoire magazine](#) in 2000. (A mentor of Le Roy Ladurie, Goubert counted the truffles, helping to invent historical demography using parish records and other local archives.)

Today social history has [receded as a label](#) but is an essential part of gender, [slavery](#) and colonial studies. Reviving “dead minds” is also crossing into archaeology, economics, psychology and artificial intelligence.

Robin Fleming has [synthesized archaeological and documentary evidence](#) to show “lots of people doing the kinds of things lots of people did in the Middle Ages.” Dewei Sheng is doing [similar work](#) on ancient Jangling.

People are studying the [history of emotions](#) and writing “[biographies](#)” of [anonymous skeletons](#). Joseph Henrich and colleagues are looking at “[historical psychology](#)” to see how humans and personalities change over time.

Artificial intelligence is joining the project. OpSci’s Pierre-Carl Langlais has trained a large language model called MonadGPT on thousands of early-modern Western texts. You can query the collective mentality of the 17th century about [love, space travel and medicine](#). (It helps to ask nicely in [archaic language](#) such as “pray tell.”)

Or argue with a Jesuit theologian from 1670 about [science and the nature of God](#). But be careful. More than three centuries after the Montaignou trials, the church was as interested as ever in *inquisitio de haeresi*.

Jay Hancock writes about history and society. He was the diplomatic correspondent and the economics correspondent for *The Baltimore Sun*. His articles have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and elsewhere. In 2020 he was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in investigative journalism. His free Substack [is here](#). He can be contacted on jayhancock@protonmail.com.

References and Resources:

Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaignou*. Multiple editions, subtitled *The Promised Land of Error* and *Cathars and Catholics in a French Village*. First translated into English in 1978 by Barbara Bray.

[Inquisition Records of Jacques Fournier](#), Bishop of Pamiers, France, 1318-1325. Translation from Latin and Occitan by Prof. Nancy Stork, San Jose State University.