

France: Identity, History and Place

Christopher Wood

This essay explores ways in which travellers can learn about their position in the world and the world itself by exploring places. Provincial France is the place that is used for this discussion. The essay does not give a whole lot of facts about French regions but rather suggests, in a round about way, ways in which a journey can be a springboard for learning about places and the meaning of place. Travellers go on journeys for many reasons, but one interest most of them share is the identity of the country they are visiting and of its people. Package tourism responds to this by creating neat formulae that stereotype people. It may depict a 'typical' French provincial male riding a bicycle, wearing a beret, with a baguette balanced across the handlebars. Parisian women may be depicted as chic, dressed in the latest French fashions. Such images are, of course, constructs that do not take into account the extraordinary diversity and complexity of most communities. No objective, physical characteristics unite people of a particular modern nation state. Genetic profiling, for example, is of little use in determining national identity. Carter Vaughan Findley has observed that Turkic people right across Inner Asia from Xinjiang Province in China to modern Turkey are very diverse in their genetic makeup, despite their common origins (1). The population of modern Turkey, for example, harbours a large percentage of European genes. Many countries like Australia are multi-cultural, composed of polyglot populations with a bewildering variety of genetic pasts.

Benedict Anderson, in his groundbreaking book *Imagined Communities* argued that a national community is the result of imagining (2). People feel themselves to be united as a nation when they subscribe to the same stories about their history, religion, 'national psyche', pleasures, cuisine, etc., and when they imagine each other believing the same stories. Members of imagined communities, moreover, imagine that other community members in turn imagine them to be part of the community. This reflexive imagining is an endless cycle of reciprocal imaginings. The question of identity is particularly pressing today, because the doctrine of the 'clash of civilisations', popularised by Samuel P. Huntington in his book of that name, promotes the idea that there are grand divisions between different civilisational identities that are irreconcilable, such as the distinction between Muslims and Christians (3). Amartya Sen, in his important new book *Identity and Violence, The Illusion of Destiny*, has argued against Huntington's thesis (4). He states that it is almost impossible to group humans together under one single, monolithic identity in part because people assume different identities at different times and on different occasions.

Inhabitants of Normandy might imagine themselves to be French when France is competing in the World Cup but might equally adopt a regional identity if FC Rouen were to play Paris Saint Germain during Le Championnat National. They may feel themselves to be part of their village community if developers threaten its beauty, but might as easily see themselves as farmers or professionals at a meeting with their associates. We must be careful not to expect that even the smallest communities have totally unified identities free from internal divisions. A French village community would, before the advent of modern transport, have been virtually isolated, and have distrusted other such communities. The village might, in fact, have resembled a large family, clan or tribe. Everyone may have known everyone and been related to each other through blood and marriage ties. This does not necessarily mean that there was more social cohesion in past isolated communities than there is today in them. Norman Pounds, following Le Roy Ladurie's fascinating study of the Pyrenean village of Montailou, emphasises the complexity of close relationships in a village that produced 'jealousies and feuds' (5). Scholars have written copiously on the identity of the French. Eugene Weber, Theodore Zeldin and Fernand Braudel are but three of them (6). Braudel, in his magisterial *The Identity of France* contrasts an image of France as a rich tapestry of

regional cultures with the notion of an essential France signified by Paris. The argument that the capital epitomises France flows from the fact that the country as a political and territorial unit was 'created' by successive dynasties of nation-forging French monarchs, who, beginning with the Capetians in the Île de France, slowly eroded regional autonomy and vanquished or absorbed competitors like the Normans, the Counts of Toulouse, the Burgundians and the Plantagenets. Their base was their royal city, Paris, which consequently grew faster and gained far greater status relative to French provincial cities than other European capitals that failed to dominate so completely their own regional population centres. After all, Germany and Italy had no national capital until their unification in the nineteenth century. Madrid only became the Spanish capital in 1561, and London's power has been attenuated in different periods by cities like York, Durham, Edinburgh, Manchester and Birmingham. The French court for most of its history has resided in the Louvre at the centre of Paris whereas the English and Spanish monarchies were more peripatetic; Canterbury and York were seats of England's archbishops, whereas the primate of the French church resided in Paris; Oxford and Cambridge, England's great seats of learning, are provincial centres, whereas France's greatest university is the University of Paris. Paris, moreover, for centuries was Western Europe's largest Christian city; in the Middle Ages only Spanish Islamic cities like Córdoba exceeded it, and it was by far the most populous Christian city west of Constantinople, until overtaken by London in the nineteenth century. This vision of France as one, unified, country of which Paris is the quintessence is, however, mediated by the undeniable richness and variety of the country's provincial cultures. Many authors, like Colin Jones, have emphasised its decentralised nature (7). One gauge of the unity of peoples as well as of diversity both between and within nations, is language. It has been used to define national boundaries and to characterise nations. The Russians, for example, separated the Central Asian States – Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan – along linguistic frontiers. Historians and human geographers, however, can also use language to distinguish between regions within a country. Many have pointed to the north-south divide in France between the langue d'oïl and the southern langue d'oc (hence Languedoc). As late as the late nineteenth century, it has been noted, a quarter of France's population did not speak French and another quarter understood it imperfectly (8). Other divisions may be discerned in France, in the status of women, in styles of vernacular architecture, in diet and cuisine, in dress, in music, folk tales, and myriad other social and cultural forms. This diversity, it is often argued, exists because for many centuries the world was much bigger than it is today; its size, in human terms, was determined by how fast people could traverse parts of it. Modern transport has created 'space-time compression' that has shrunk our world and changed people's understanding of it (9). For long periods French regions, therefore, isolated by poor communications, evolved differently to each other. Modern technology, in contrast, has produced standardisation. Before railway cargo transport, for example, local architectural styles were defined by the nature of available, local, building materials; wood, sandstone, slate, etc. Industrialisation not only facilitated the production of standardised building materials like brick and iron, but also their conveyance everywhere, so that French provincial towns and villages have in part lost their unique material texture. Regional variations not only delight travellers with a rich tapestry of sights, sounds, tastes and smells but also speak to us, despite some 'false' pasts (traditions), of the deep antiquity of French regional culture. Variety evolved during the Middle Ages when Roman Gaul declined and the political landscape disintegrated. Cities of Roman Gaul, like those throughout the Roman Empire, were to an extent of standard layout. Temples, fora, baths, theatres, amphitheatres, triumphal arches and other architectural types imposed a certain sameness on the cityscapes of antiquity that sent visual messages about Roman power and imperial unity. The antique countryside, meanwhile, was traversed by substantial, straight roads and was divided into vast latifundia, agricultural estates worked by slaves. These estates were not separated by walls or hedges as they came to be in the Middle Ages. Many of France's primordial forests had meanwhile been cleared to provide fuel, space for crops, and construction material. Population decline, invasion and political instability from the fifth to the ninth century allowed French forests to flourish once more. Communities became isolated as roads fell into disrepair or became dangerous. Villas gave way to new centres of power, castles, located in defensible positions. The typical French village, which has persisted in its basic medieval form

until today, began to evolve. Unlike the straight streets of a Roman colonia, its narrow thoroughfares twisted and turned, following topography and agricultural function. New urban and landscape forms evolved – the village church and marketplace, the meadow and the hedge. Although landscape elements such as hedges may have been relocated since the Middle Ages, the important point to observe is that hedges are a medieval form and so we owe their existence, rather than their present shapes and positions, to this period (10). Local cultural and landscape forms probably delight travellers to France because they speak to them of an old, changeless world. In the past, travel was a journey to the unknown from a stable home. Now we are 'stranded in the present', victims of a strange mix of constant change and the banal sameness and routine of modern life. We travel in search of difference and venerability. In this search for the past we must, however, exercise caution because traditions, as Eric Hobsbaum and Terence Ranger have shown, may be invented (11). A 'medievalised' village may give an illusion of antiquity like the ivy growing on the walls of a modern university or school that associates it with ancient education foundations. This invention of the 'physical' past began in nineteenth-century France in response to the destruction wrought by revolutionaries and quickened as people living anonymous lives subject to an ever increasing pace of change began to hanker for *La France profonde* (deep France). False traditions may also be detected in human rituals and fashions. One of the most famous 'bogus' traditions, which stereotypes French males, is the image of the Frenchman in his beret. As Theodore Zeldin explains: The beret never used to be the mark of a Frenchman; until 1923 it was Basque, and worn only in the Pyrenees region. Then suddenly it was adopted as a French fashion, becoming almost a national uniform by 1932, when twenty-three million were manufactured, virtually one for every Frenchman. But the fashion was almost as suddenly abandoned in the 1950s, and today less than a million are bought annually by men. The fad survives only in the French army, which tries to look respectable and modest by clinging to outdated styles of clothing (something quite new for it also, because when martial virtues were more admired, soldiers did their best to look conspicuous)... The man in the beret represents only a brief episode in French history, encapsulated in the films of Renoir. (12) Hobsbaum and Ranger distinguish traditions, which can be relatively new but which aim, in order to suggest antiquity and so seem changeless, from customs, which have longer lineages but transmute regularly in subtle ways (13). Traditions as described by Hobsbaum and Ranger, bear interesting parallels to the stereotypes used by package tourism. Whereas traditions beguile with false antiquity, Zeldin argues that by the time a stereotype is formed, it is usually out of date. This is because stereotypes, by nature, are not only rigid and changeless, but also take time to become entrenched in the popular imagination. How can travellers to France, confronted by the slipperiness of identity, its multiplicities and changefulness, make sense of their experiences and perceptions? One stratagem lies in not trying to find absolute answers that are likely to be stereotypes but to enjoy the process of exploring the many identities of the French. This sits well with the educative purpose of travel, for education is a perpetual exploration of the nature of 'being in the world' which, unlike training with its particular, measurable outcomes, enjoys an open-ended exploration of society's intricacies. Thus we can accrue education but cannot call ourselves educated, because education constantly presents hitherto unknown intellectual vistas (14). The danger, of course, in adopting such an open-ended universalist approach is that it can lead to complete confusion, so that we may depart France with a set of jumbled sensations and no intimation of the nature of French identity and identities. A solution is to explore identity through 'place', a concept which is particularly sympathetic to travel. Since the emergence of cultural geography in the decades following World War II, practitioners of many disciplines such as philosophy, history, heritage, architecture, planning, archaeology, anthropology and ethnography have become interested in the meaning of 'place' and a 'sense of place'. Philosophers, in particular, have explored the nature of being (ontology) through 'place'. Edward Casey, in two ground breaking books, has argued that since the seventh century AD, and especially since the Enlightenment, philosophers have defined what it is to be human in terms of metaphysical space, divorcing identity from the immediate, sensed world (15). Descartes, founder of the modern French intellectual tradition, implied this in his grand statement 'I think therefore I am', which separated the intellect from bodily existence. Consciousness therefore became an abstract thing related to concepts rather than places. This severance

of humanity from 'place' and its location in space became further complicated as thinkers - from those who first invented ways of determining longitude (place relative to Greenwich mean time), to Einstein's great Law - saw space as relative to time. Thus philosophers have defined humanity in terms of indeterminate abstractions rather than what we may call 'place worlds'. Casey argues that we define ourselves in terms of place. Places make us and we in turn make places. We understand human relations in terms of place, and, as Jeff Malpas has argued, place links us to the past. Place, in this context, constitutes 'locale' rather than location. The latter describes a neutral site described, for example, by the (objective) coordinates on a map. Locale is subjective, being a location which has human meaning. Imagine yourself to be a French person moving from a Paris apartment to a house in a French village where you have bought a picturesque little cottage. You found this house on the Internet and located it using a detailed Michelin map. When you move into your new house it is bare, except for essential fixtures. It is a neutral space. You buy some rustic furniture, paint the rooms bright colours, unpack linen and clothes, and hang new curtains and some favourite pictures. You are transforming the house from a location to a locale. The small street where your cottage is located, at first a neutral, unfamiliar, corridor, slowly becomes the centre of your world. You meet neighbours whose relation to you is determined by sharing the street. After a year, your first child is born. Some of its earliest sensations and memories will be of the home you have created. These sensations will shape its character, for even its relationship with you is 'emplaced'. As it grows the village, with its small local school, will define your child's sense of social relationships. These will probably involve a familiarity (and possible tensions) with neighbours that would never have been possible had your child grown up in your former Paris apartment. Your relationship to your village represents how humans make place which in turn makes them. A journey constitutes the sum of a series of places which both form the settings of, and actively participate in, the interaction of the place-worlds of travellers and hosts. Although it is possible to say that a journey unfolds across space, we sense this space - let's say of Normandy and the Loire Valley - as a sequence of places that follow each other like the scenes in a movie. Place is, in fact, like a skin that at any one time surrounds us. Even when we look out to the horizon we are looking, in fact, at the boundary, at any one time, of a set of places. A horizon has no substantial existence, of course, because as we journey it shifts. It is merely the boundary of a field of vision that is full of places. Imagine that the bus on which you are travelling through Burgundy or the Pays de la Loire has stopped for a short time. You have descended and are looking out across hills, valleys and forests to the horizon, somewhere behind which is the village in which you'll spend the next few days with Parisian friends who've moved to the country. You are looking across space, but this has no meaning because it is just an abstract void. What matters is the peculiar shape of the landscape, with its gentle topography, its densely wooded clumps, its meadows, the lines of hedges bordering its small, winding roads, and, at measurable intervals, the spires of village churches that rise from villages whose roofs you can just make out among the trees. You may try to orientate the panorama by looking at a map, but this is for mere curiosity and does not tell you much about its character. It is the landscape itself that gives you a sense of place. Your bus begins to move again. As it weaves down narrow country roads, passing little farms with picturesque barns, old mills, copses, and through villages with small marketplaces and old churches, this general feeling of place unfolds, becomes more specific and intricate, and gains new, more precise, meanings. You begin to understand the local building style and agricultural produce - from signs selling honey. The cattle in the field have particular markings. Time here is a function of place, in that the slow progress of your bus along narrow roads suggests you are travelling in a place that is more closely linked to a slower past than modern Paris. But what of placeless places in France? The French anthropologist Marc Augé has written of between places like airports that are transition zones without distinctive characteristics. These he argues lack the authenticity of deeply located places. This could be said of a French motorway that is merely a way of travelling across space to meaningful places. Or perhaps the French government is trying to make motorways more place-like by lining them with belvederes and signs that direct drivers to historic sites nearby!

Hitherto, this essay has in a number of ways touched upon the relation of the past to the present. This relationship is vital to our understanding of regional places in France. Unlike many historians, who reconstruct particular pasts from texts, we travel in the 'palpable' present. We, in fact, explore the past only in so far as it has moulded the places that delight us. The special virtue, to a traveller, of Fernand Braudel's *The Identity of France* is that Braudel, a historical geographer, in this book exudes the acuity of a particularly observant traveller. There is no such thing as the typical French village. There are clearly many types of village: here diversity and the plural reign supreme. The reasons are many. In the first place, villages differ according to their principle activity: it might be livestock farming, or cereals, or vines, or olives, or mulberry trees, or chestnuts, or apples, or small-scale industry – or any number of things. To take one example among many, the wine-growing village is instantly recognizable: it 'forgoes land, which is expensive, all the willingly since it positively welcomes the dark and cool conditions suitable for cellars; [its] buildings huddle together. A village living by the plough on the contrary will spread itself over the open plain round about. Elsewhere, the doors of the village houses might open on to workshops where the weaver, shoemaker or upholsterer plied their trades. To this diversity is added that of architectural tradition (houses built in blocks or around courtyards), of building materials, of local features related to the climate or the water supply. So there is the Provencal hill village, with its narrow streets to shield one from the sun and wind; the Lorraine village, with its adjoining houses lining the broad street that also serves as a farmyard; and the very different Breton village, scattered and dispersed, its houses isolated on their own farmland...(16) Whereas historians use texts, the challenge to travellers 'on the spot' is to decode sensations – of sight, smell, sound and taste – in an intelligent way so that through a 'sense of place' we begin to make sense of the identity of our hosts. We begin to test our emerging sense of place (locale) against our understanding of that of our hosts. So begins a fascinating dynamic of reciprocal meanings of 'being in the world'. The styles of local buildings and the streetscapes of a village, the particular tones of local church bells, the smell and taste of a local cheese, may together signify a villager's 'sense of place'. We travellers, in turn, modify subtly the places we visit. At the edge of town is a bus park for large tourist coaches. In the main street are souvenir shops that would not exist without visitors. Our exclamations of delight in savouring a delicious local cheese in a local market elicit pride that reinforces local identity. Collectively, travellers may even act in crucial ways to preserve local artisan work and cooking. The standardisation of the European Union has on the one hand led to aggressive assertions of local identity and on the other endangered local production. A local cheese, therefore, may be 'saved' by travellers who buy it because they are searching for variety, an essential ingredient of travel. This is most certainly true of many artisan products like Tuscan ceramics, which almost died out in the nineteenth century due to competition from cheap foreign china. They were revived for tourism. What does it mean to decode the past in the present? Historians may both ignore accretions from periods later than their chosen fields and reconstruct that which is lost. They may, like, David Garrioch in his excellent article 'Sounds of the city: the soundscape of Early Modern European Towns', not only reconstruct sounds which no longer exist, such as the clip-clop of horses hooves, but also attempt to peel away layers of modern noise to explore the original meanings of sounds whose meanings have changed, such as the toll of bells (17). Bells were vital to pre-modern life. They summoned people to church, reinforcing Christian identity, especially in Spain where they shared soundscapes with Islamic calls to prayer. They tolled when a joyous event occurred or warned of danger. They called the people to civic gatherings, and even, before clocks, told them the time of day. They did not have to compete with modern ambient sound and so even defined the geographical limits of a town, separating it sonically and psychologically from the countryside. This was particularly important when cities were Christian and the countryside still more or less pagan (the English 'peasant', French 'paysanne' and Italian 'paese' all derive from the Latin 'paganus', which also, of course, is the source of 'pagan') (18). Today, however, bells and other 'old sounds' must compete with ambient noise. Unlike a historian who tries to ignore modern sounds, however, for a traveller they are part of a place's story. They constitute, for example, a key signifier of the tension between the past and modernity that has affected so vitally provincial European identity. Travellers to France should focus not only on a lost past, but on the past in the present. Place, as Jeff Malpas has

stated, links the past to the present (19). One of the great virtues of Braudel's narratives, as we have seen, is that they weave the past through the present in vivid descriptions of place. One vehicle we may use to enrich our 'sense of place' is cultural landscapes. 'Cultural landscapes' take two forms. They are:

- Physical expressions of the stories of places - such as agricultural or industrial regions, the countryside, rural scenes, cityscapes and townscapes, parklands or gardens; or
- Creative evocations of the stories of places in text, image or tune;

Cultural landscapes evolve from interactions between humans and their environment. They are layered through time like a palimpsest in which the ghost of an earlier text is discernable beneath its successor. Cultural landscapes result from:

- the influence of geology, topography and climate upon the location, form and fortunes of human settlements and the quality and shape of human activity, be it religious, political, commercial, social, or artistic;
- changes wrought by human activity in all its diversity upon the environment; and
- creative interactions with the environment producing imagined landscapes such as the settings of novels, the subject matter of paintings, the themes of musical compositions, or the narratives of past travellers (20). Cultural landscapes can be explored everywhere by travellers (21). One example of the influence of geology and topography upon human settlement is the distribution of vineyards in France. These are to be found on the banks of France's great rivers like the Loire, not because of the need of water, for France has ample rainfall, but because rivers in the past constituted France's major thoroughfares; wine in the Middle Ages was the country's greatest export. In a largely subsistent past, local conditions affected critically the type and quantity of food available in a region. Humans, in turn, shaped the environment through agriculture. Beauce, in the centre of France, was a great granary and so its fields are large and open, without clear boundaries. Lower Normandy, on the other hand, has a rich pastoral landscape broken up by hedges and trees. This landscape is called bocage, and is associated with grazing, and two of the region's major products, meat and milk. Patterns of settlement were influenced by topography and agriculture. Many of France's villages tend to be a day's walk from each other, which reflected a balance between the need to communicate on the one hand, and the amount of land required to support each community on the other. Different modes of agricultural production like grain growing required greater areas of cultivation than others, such as wine grapes. The distances between settlements might therefore be determined by the foodstuffs produced in a region. They may, as in the case of wine, also be influenced by the desire to move beyond subsistence by exporting surplus. In the eighteenth century, when transport improved, Normandy came increasingly to supply Paris with food. This was essential to orderly government in the capital, for starvation was a major trigger of revolt. Lower Normandy's great fertility, and her role in supplying food to Paris, both contributed to the region's past and present agricultural character. This, in turn, means that Lower Normandy's population today is politically conservative and has a low rate of tertiary education. Its rate of unemployment, however, is lower than the national average (22) It is important to note that 'place' operates not just as a setting for, but also as an active agent in, human history. Interactions between human groups can themselves be determined by the environment. The locations of French rivers, for instance, have played a role in the country's political history. The Vikings established territories in what is now Normandy because they could sail their long boats up the Seine. River valleys everywhere also provided conduits for land armies which in turn dictated the locations of defensive strongholds. In the Dordogne, the location and orientation of fortified towns called bastides atop steep ridges was determined by struggles between the French royal house and the Plantagenets during the Hundred Years' War. The locations of many towns often, of course, also reflect their historical origins. In antiquity, settlements of Celtic origin were usually located atop defensible hills. Towns of Roman provenance like Autun and Arles, on the other hand, occupied open territory on major (Roman) roads. Roman provincial centres had less need of defence. Even the distribution of buildings within a French town may reflect the complexity of human interactions across, in and with place. Castles, set high above settlements, were built as much to control local populations as to defend them (23). Churches might be located where pagan temples once stood, in locales deemed sacred. They might equally be the very reason for the existence of the town. Remote hermitages established by early religious anchorites might become monasteries which relied upon the toil of lay populations who formed settlements around

them. Such is the case of Conques, hidden away in a deep gorge of the Massif Central. Conques prospered despite its isolation because its monks brought to it the relics of the popular adolescent saint, Foi, and it became a major *étape* (stop) on the pilgrim route to Santiago de Compostela. This, in turn, led to a change in the architecture of the town. By the fifteenth century canons were responsible for services in the Abbey church of Sainte-Foi. They built houses throughout the town, some of which were reasonably substantial. These houses form the urban fabric of this delightful town today. One of the most important public spaces in French villages and regional towns is the marketplace. In smaller settlements, this would be devoted to local agricultural produce. In larger ones, it may be the site of a fair where artisan work made in the region, as well as goods from elsewhere, were traded. Powerful leaders would patronise such fairs because they attracted taxable wealth to their districts. Champagne and later North Eastern France became loci of great fairs (24). Picardy and its neighbour the Netherlands, meanwhile, became economic powerhouses due to the manufacture of cloth. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries they generated fantastic wealth garnered by merchants whose houses occupied central locations near the marketplace, which in turn was invariably located in the main streets of town close to the cathedral. Such is the case of Amiens, documented by Pierre Deyon in his *Amiens capitale provinciale*. Deyon mapped the houses of Amiens that paid the highest taxes (25). Often a traveller can discern such spatial hierarchies of domestic buildings today even 'though many of the lesser houses, which often were little more than humble shacks, have been cleared. Near Le Mans Cathedral, for example, is a fine range of houses whose facades are enlivened with decorative wood carvings. Other physical factors governed the distribution of socio-economic groups within a settlement. Industries which required waterpower or riverine transport would be found on the banks of a river or stream. Such would be the case of watermills, a medieval invention. Malodorous, noisy and messy trades like tanning, metalwork and pottery could be expected to be located at the edge of a town or village. Trades that dealt with bulky materials like lumber were also generally found on the outer edges of town. Today, long after many trades have disappeared, their memories persist in the names of districts and streets. In a period such as the Middle Ages, when communities were threatened regularly by invasion, defensive walls surrounded most towns. Before the advent of gunpowder, these were high and thin. Powerful towers reinforced them at intervals. These walls can be seen in miniatures like those of Jean and Herman Limbourg's *Treize Riches Heures du Duc de Berri* (c.1416, Musée Condé, Chantilly). Fragments of many walls survive in towns like Angers, and others were restored in the nineteenth century. Viollet-le-Duc (1814-1879) reconstructed the walls of the southern city of Carcassonne. In large towns and cities walls have left their trace in boulevards built where they once stood when unprecedented nineteenth-century population growth led to the development of sprawling suburbs beyond them. The plans of smaller settlements that never outgrew their former walls may nevertheless give clues to the locations of these lost walls. In many, streets tend not to lead out of town but to turn back toward its centre as if avoiding an invisible obstacle. How many travellers, attempting to walk out into the countryside, have found themselves back where they started? Town walls could be symbolic as well as practical. They stood for the autonomy of a community and its unwillingness to tolerate foreign intervention. Medieval town walls, like the acoustic range of town bells, signified a break between city and country. Dwellers in the countryside were looked down upon by city dwellers. It has already been noted that they were associated with paganism in the early Middle Ages. Cities were seen as places of freedom, in part from bullying nobles. Human settlements and cultivated landscapes shaped by human use signified order and safety. In late antiquity, we have already stated, Europe reforested because population dropped. The forests separating village communities were treated with ambivalence. They on the one hand were an invaluable resource for villagers. For example, the small carved roundel dedicated to the month of October on the portal *voussoirs* of the cathedral of Saint-Lazare, Autun, depicts a peasant knocking acorns out of a forest oak to feed his pigs. Yet the forest, harbinger of dangerous beasts, brigands and terrifyingly unknowable things, was also a place to be feared. Think of the number of frightening fairy stories, many of them descended from old folk tales, which are set in forests. Modern travellers have been taught, by nineteenth-century Romantics, to value wilderness. In the Middle Ages, on the other hand, land that was not cultivated was considered a realm of chaos. It was only

with the Renaissance, when forests had been depleted and maps had made the world more knowable, that humans began to garden large tracts of France. Hitherto, monastic and palace gardens had been small, bounded places. As knowledge of the world increased French formal gardens came to signify the power and ability of humans to shape nature according to logic. The geometry of a formal garden of boxes, parterres and carefully shaped beds echoed other manifestations of the rational intellect, such as perspective. They represented a revolution in humans' sense of 'being in the world'. The castles that dominated communities also changed during the Renaissance. These had both reflected and symbolised the independence of France's medieval nobility who dominated the countryside, threatening royal power and bullying the local populace. The growth of a merchant class in late medieval towns initiated the decline of this powerful elite, especially when these citizens allied themselves with the crown. During the Ancien Regime, absolute monarchs like Louis XIV managed to change the nobility's status to that of courtiers. Royal pressure and the influence of Italian Renaissance courtly taste led to the transformation of defensive citadels into palatial châteaux, like those of the Loire Valley. Whereas medieval fortresses were positioned on defensible high ground, many châteaux, like Villandry in the Loire Valley, spread out across flatter sites, in order, in part, to accommodate ample formal gardens. A medieval fortress, moreover, was designed from the outside in, because impregnability was its priority. Interior spaces therefore could be dark, damp and asymmetrical. Renaissance courtly behaviour demanded that interior spaces of châteaux be ample, logically set out in relation to each other, and symmetrical. Narrow medieval spiral staircases gave way to larger processional, symmetrical flights that became an integral, central, emphatic, part of the design. Interior layout in turn influenced façade design, in which massing and fenestration became symmetrical. Sometimes vestiges of older forms such as defensive towers inflected Renaissance massing. Towers with conical caps frame the symmetrical Renaissance façades of Azay-le-Rideau in the Loire. Its defensive moat meanwhile has transmuted into a decorative lake. It has already been noted that before the advent of steam transport the type and availability of building materials determined the regional styles of buildings. An abundance of wood meant that the walls of Norman houses have wooden frames. Caen in lower Normandy, however, has excellent local building stone, which accounts for the development of fine ecclesiastical architecture in this region. The Loire Valley is also blessed with good stone, which was used in the construction of that region's fine châteaux. The influx of stonemasons to build Loire châteaux in turn influenced the construction of humbler residences. Even village houses in this region often boast excellent dressed stone walls with carved decorative elements. The wooden jambs and corbel tables of Norman houses, on the other hand, provided scope for wood carving. Such stone or wood flourishes were visual statements of status. They could be very sophisticated as in the house of the rich merchant, Jacques Coeur, in Bourges. Where good clay, not stone, was readily available, brick was often used. Bricks could be moulded or set at angles to each other to create patterns that enlivened façades. These bricks are distinguished from their modern, pressed, counterparts by their uneven shapes. A traveller may always distinguish between old brick buildings and nineteenth-century structures mimicking historical styles by the clean and precise lines of the latter's brickwork. Before mass transport local resources also dictated roofing materials such as slate, wooden shingles, or tiles. Climate also played a part. In colder climes where snow abounded in winter, roof angles were steeper. Whilst the great variety of particular regional architectural styles of French villages and towns delights travellers, architecture also played an important part in defining French local identity and inculcating pride. In the thirteenth century, for example, French towns attempted to outdo each other with ever higher Gothic cathedrals. Bishops, abbots and other important people in pilgrim centres vied with other shrines over the importance of their relics, and built ever more magnificent shrines to house these precious possessions. They aimed to attract pilgrims, much as modern French syndicates d'initiatives compete for tourists. Competition could become vituperative, especially when pilgrim centres claimed the same relic, like the skull of St John. Aimery Picaud, Poitevan author of the pilgrim guide to Santiago de Compostela, the Liber Sancti Jacobi, showed how nasty such squabbles could become: May therefore the monks of Corbigny blush for saying that they possess the body of the Blessed Leonard: for in no way can the smallest bone of his bones, or for that matter his ashes, as stated above, be removed.

Those of Corbingy, no less than many others, are enriched by his benefices and his miracles, but they delude themselves concerning his corporeal presence. Not having been able to obtain his body, they worship, in lieu of the remains of Saint Leonard of Limoges, the remains of a certain man by the name of Leotard who, so they say, was brought to them placed in a silver casket from the country of Anjou. They have even changed his proper name after death, as if he could have been baptized a second time, and imposed upon him the name of Saint Leonard in order that by the fame of a name so great and celebrated, that is to say Saint Leonard of Limousin, pilgrims would flock there and enrich them with their offerings. (26) Special institutions, such as the Hôtel Dieu, Beaune, gave a town great status (27). Its rich, colourful Flemish tile roof became a landmark celebrating the power and grandeur of its patron, Nicolas Rolin, as well as that of Beaune. The quality of a town's domestic architecture and the state of its streets were both causes for pride. Medieval bridges also were extremely important in a world where easy river crossings were rare. A town with a good bridge attracted merchant traffic and wealth. The quality of local water was also of greatest importance, because many rivers were polluted, by human and animal excrement, dead animals and effluent from dirty trades like tanning. Aimery Picaud was careful to designate which rivers on the route were and were not poisonous in his guide (28). Walls, town gates, towers and other profile elements were seen as emblems of towns. Sixteenth and seventeenth century engravings of cities present them like portraits of important people, placing great emphasis upon the towers and spires that enlivened their skylines; often these vertical elements are disproportionately large. Such images suggest that towns' profiles were important to their 'sense of place' and identity. This could have been especially important in a world that lacked modern road signage. Hitherto, this essay has dealt with cultural landscapes as palpable places. But cultural landscapes, as noted earlier, can also be imagined places such as the settings of French novels or landscape paintings. These are also important in defining identity, for, in a sense, they provide a theatre for and active ingredient in, Anderson's communal imagining. Many contributed in instrumental ways to the evolution of modern French identity. During the nineteenth century Parisians reacted in different ways against the anonymity and alienation of their vast, expanding, ever-changing metropolis. French Impressionists like Pissarro, for example, in his Boulevard Montmartre series, depicted crowd members as literally 'faceless'. Another reaction was to seek the past and a more authentic French identity in the countryside. The poet Mistral, for example, created the world's first folk museum in Arles. This search for La France Profond intersected with burgeoning nineteenth century nationalism, which attempted to isolate essential national characteristics in the forms and mores of the French countryside and country manners. The interest of the French Impressionists in country landscapes presents a conundrum, for it was the development of railways, a technological force that promoted standardisation and the loss of the peculiar regional reflections of the past that made Impressionists' visits to the countryside possible. If their landscape motifs are plotted on a map they correspond to railway lines such as that from Paris to the Normandy coast. The search for La France Profond was most certainly not the exclusive preserve of the Impressionists. From the 1820s images of the French countryside were seen as an important signifier of national pride. This concern, which gathered force with the growing popularity of travel in France and the development of the French railways, was accompanied by periodic panics that French monuments and the countryside were threatened by development. More overtly nationalistic was French state patronage of official landscape painting in the Paris Salon exhibitions. In 1995, London's Hayward Gallery mounted an interesting exhibition entitled Landscapes of France: Impressionism and its rivals, which juxtaposed the works of Pissarro, Monet, Sisley and their fellows with grandiose images of France presented to the Salon and bought by the State. This gave these large canvases enormous exposure in public places. In his introduction to the exhibition catalogue, John House discerns a change of interest during the thirty years of great artistic ferment in France from 1860 to 1890. He states: Up to the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War and the fall of Emperor Napoleon III in 1870, during the so-called 'liberal' phase of the Second Empire, there was much technical experimentation in Salon landscape. The State bought a wide range of paintings for France's museums and public buildings, including some of the boldest Salon landscapes. But this experimentation involved primarily the ways in which the landscapes were presented

and executed; their subject matter remained conventional, focusing on the distinctive sites of rural France. In the later 1860s the Impressionists-to-be developed a small-scale, calculatedly informal type of landscape, often picturesque by contemporary standards and of an explicitly modern subject. The Impressionists developed and accentuated these characteristics in the 1870s. In addition, they exhibited many landscapes that were startlingly lightly worked and seemingly unfinished. In contrast with the shock caused by the Impressionist landscapes of the mid 1870s, the Salon became more conservative. In the wake of France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War and the events of the Paris Commune, the early years of the Third Republic witnessed an attempt by the State to reinstate a time-honoured notion of history painting. Reversing its policy of the 1860s, the State purchased very few landscapes in the mid-1870s, and those it did were markedly traditional, even neo-classical in style. However, the position of landscape was transformed by the government changes of the late 1870s and the emergence of the 'opportunistic' Republic. From 1879 onwards, open-air painting was actively encouraged by the authorities, as were overtly contemporary subjects, and both were purchased by the State. Simultaneously, in about 1880, several painters of the Impressionist group abandoned their unpicturesque contemporary subjects in favour of lavish views of dramatic and remote sites. Impressionist influence also began to be felt at the Salon... (29) Since the seventeenth century, art and literature have both been enriched by travel and in turn have influenced where people travel and the way they see places. Examples of the latter are myriad, from the influence of Nicholas Poussin upon the Grand Tour, to the use of tinted Claude glasses through which people contemplated a framed, tinted view of an English landscape garden; the yellow tint of the glass gave an antique hue like a classical landscape painting. This reciprocity between physical and imagined landscapes is reflected in the fact that images of landscapes often influence the way people make place. English landscape gardens were not, for example, based upon gardening precedent but upon the images of Claude and Poussin. In fact, the English word landscape (derived from the German Landschaft and Dutch Landskaap) was used to describe depictions of countryside before it designated the countryside itself. This influence of art upon nature can descend to the ridiculous. The architecture of the Place du Forum, Arles, is of a uniform grey colouring. Van Gogh painted the square at night, bathing the Café du Forum in a nightmarish yellow light, in keeping with his symbolic use of colour. The café has now been painted yellow to align it with Van Gogh's image! There are many, far less absurd examples in which locals' and travellers' 'sense of place' has been honed by artists and writers. The beautiful little beach scenes at Honfleur by Eugène Boudin and Monet's images of Étretat changed forever the meaning of the Normandy coast for hosts and visitors alike. It is interesting to speculate how imagined cultural landscapes can, in fact, act as a bridge between visitors' and locals' 'sense of place'. Claude Monet's creation of a wonderful garden at Giverny as a motif for his late 'waterlilies' is arguably the most exquisitely balanced of all examples of reflexivity between nature and art. Monet's artistic imperatives led to a dynamic symbiosis between creation and depiction. This, one might argue, led, not only to a reflexivity between made place and made images of place but, in Monet's *Nymphéas in the Musée de l'Orangerie*, where a huge painted field surrounds the viewer, to the creation of image as place. In a world where everything, including tourism and the places people visit, is becoming commodified, journeys can easily lose all meaning. Alain de Botton, echoing a common complaint of theorists and critics, speaks of the "prepackaged, predigested and unmotivated facts of modern guidebooks". Unfortunately for the traveller, most objects don't come affixed with the question that will generate the excitement they deserve. There is usually nothing fixed to them at all, or if there is it tends to be the wrong thing. (30) There is, however an answer to this dilemma. The exploration of identity through place, expressed in cultural landscapes, can give travel meaning and a moral edge by challenging us to explore what it is to 'be in the world'. A search for decisive, simple, answers will produce only illusions and stereotypes, as there are no easy solutions to questions of identity and 'a sense of place'. France's intellectuals, more than those of any other nation, have explored the meaning of place in their country and have arrived at myriad conclusions. This need not worry us, however, because a journey to France is enriched by the process of searching for truths, not by attaining the illusion of any one truth.

- Notes (1) Carter Vaughan Findley, *The Turks in World History*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005). p.225. (2) B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, Verso, 1991). (3) Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1997). (4) Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence, the Illusion of Destiny*, (London, Allen Lane, 2006). (5) Norman J.G. Pounds, *Hearth & Home, A History of Material Culture*, (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1993), p.4; E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: Cathars and Catholics in a French Village*, (London, 1978). (6) Fernand Braudel, *The Identity of France*, 2 Vols, (transl. Sian Reynolds), (London, Collins 1988); Eugen Weber, *My France: Politics, Culture, Myth*, (Cambridge Mass., The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991); Theodore Zeldin, *The French*, (London, Collins Harvill, 1983...88). (7) C. Jones, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of France*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994). P.8f. (8) C. Jones, p.10 (9) See T. Creswell, *Place: a short introduction*, (Oxford, Blackwell, 2004), pp. 62-63 for Doreen Massey's interpretation, in 'A Global Sense of Place', in D. Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, (Minneapolis, University of Minneapolis Press, 1994). (10) Hedges probably in large part evolved as a means of protecting communities from dangerous people and wild animals, as well as to create property boundaries and to pen domestic animals. (11) E. J. Hobsbaum & Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition*, (Cambridge, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1983). (12) Theodore Zeldin, *The French*, P.36 (13) E. J. Hobsbaum & Terence Ranger, p. (14) I have evolved this concept of the relation of travel to education from discussions by philosophers such as R.S. Peters; see P.H. Hirst & R.S. Peters, *The Logic of Education*, (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970).
- (15) E. Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1993); E. Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997); J.E. Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999); See also T. Creswell, *Place: a short introduction*, (Oxford, Blackwell, 2004) and recent debate in *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 91, 4, 2001, including E. Casey, 'Between geography and philosophy: What does it mean to be in the place-world?' pp. 683-9; J. N. Entrikin, 'Hiding Places', pp. 694-7; T. R. Schatzki, 'Subject, Body, Place', pp. 698 – 702; B. Hooper, 'Desiring Presence, Romancing the Real', pp. 703-715; E. S. Casey, 'On Habitus and Place: Responding to my Critics', pp. 716 – 723. (16) Fernand Braudel, *The Identity of France*, vol. 1, pp. 129-130. (17) D. Garrioch, 'Sounds of the city: the soundscape of Early Modern European Towns', *Urban History*, 30, 1 2003, pp. 5-25. (18) A. Corbin, *Village Bells, The Culture of the Senses in the Nineteenth-Century French Countryside*, Translated by Martin Thom, (New York, Columbia University Press 1998). (19) J. Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999). (20) C. Wood, 'Educational Tourism', Ch. 8 of Norman Douglas, Ngaire Douglas & Ros Derrett, *Special Interest Tourism, Contexts and Cases*, (Brisbane, John Wiley & Sons, 2001), p.200ff. (21) Pedrag Matvejevic, *The Mediterranean, A Cultural Landscape*, (transl. Michael Henry Heim), (Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1999). (22) W. Northcutt, *The Regions of France, A Reference Guide to History and Culture*, (Westport Conn., Greenwood Press, 1996), P.185. (23) Pierre Toubert, 'Incastellamento' in G. Gracco et al. (eds), *L'Europa e il mondo medioevo*, (Turin, SEI, 1992), pp. 177-187. (24) Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989). (25) Pierre Deyon, *Amiens capitale provinciale*, (Paris, 1967), p. 543. (26) Translation of the *Liber Sancti Jacobi* by William Melczer in *The Pilgrim's Guide to Santiago de Compostela*, (New York, Italica Press, 1993), p. 105. John House, 'Introduction' to *Landscapes of France, Impressionism and its rivals*, (London, Hayward Gallery, 1995), pp.8-9. (27) Bridgitte Maurice-Chabard (ed), *La splendeur des Rolin*, (Paris, Picaud, 1999), P.101ff.
- (28) *Liber Sancti Jacobi* pp. 88-90 (29) John House, 'Introduction', to *Landscapes of France, Impressionism and its rivals*, (London, Hayward Gallery, 1995), pp.8-9 (30) Alain de Botton, from *The Art of Travel*,

(London, Hamish Hamilton, 2002).

