

## ARCHIVAL FIELDWORK

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There are geographers who do not enjoy fieldwork. One of my colleagues in the late 1960s, an eminent spatial theorist, could not abide the world as it presented itself to the senses. It was too cluttered. He liked to be driven, and he would sit in the back seat of a large car with the blinds down. At home he watched gangster films and adjusted his equations. But most of us are not such purists. We are more inclined to take the world as it is—or as it seems to be—to get out into it, look hard at it, ask questions about it, and grapple with the conundrums so presented. This usually means fieldwork, and many a geographer would say that the high points of a working geographical life have been exhilarating experiences in the field.

So it has been for me. The layered landscapes of southern France, encountered during a memorable year between undergraduate studies at the University of British Columbia and graduate work at the University of Wisconsin, largely made me a historical geographer. Coming from western Canada, I had never seen anything like the accumulation of human land uses, from the Paleolithic through the Greeks and Romans, the Visigoths, the Moors, then belatedly the consolidating French state of Louis XIV, and, underlying much of this, the prolonged pressures of charcoal burners, herders, and peasant farmers. Traces of all of this, and much more, were there to be seen. I had come to Montpellier to improve my French, but the countryside was more interesting than phonetics or grammar. I acquired an old bicycle and left the classroom, and in so doing I began to encounter ancient hilltop villages with communist mayors and old people who were more than ready to give me a peasant supper (with goats and sheep in the next room) and an evening's talk about the departing young. I knew little and understood less, but I was enchanted.

Years later I found myself face to face with the landscapes of famine and enclosure along the western Celtic fringe of the British Isles. It is one thing to read about such events, quite another to see their residual landscapes. Just above a cobble beach in Galway Bay is a stone wall—a frail effort, I thought, to contain the sea—and beyond that wall are tiny field upon tiny field, some no larger than a bedroom, each surrounded by rock walls. In those walls is the peasant struggle to eke out a living when land was at a premium, labor was virtually worthless, and there was no alternative to piling boulders and grubbing in the patches between. Fossil lazy beds (ridged potato plots) on steep slopes tell the same story, as does the meanest field I have ever seen, a walled acre or so of limestone in Connemara that might, in a pinch, support two or three desperate sheep for a couple of days a year. In the Hebrides the details are different, but the results are much the same. The precrofter clachan landscapes (before the landlords replaced tenants with sheep and relocated them to small

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