

BEZIERS in the XIXth Century Michel Fournier

The life of Father Jean Gailhac embraces most of the XIXth century, like that of Victor Hugo, of whom he is the exact contemporary (1802-1885). This is the reason for the title of my talk: the XIXth Century in Béziers.

Everyone here knows that the XIXth century brought great changes which are classified under the convenient name of *industrial revolution* but that these changes affect the whole economic order, transform society and involve a development of attitudes.

So you can see my triple objective: the economic, social and mental transformation of Béziers in the 19th century.

➤ **Economic transformations and their consequences**

The industrial revolution is especially, in Béziers, an agricultural revolution, that of the advent of mass viticulture, furthered by the implementation of technical progress.

These technical advances are well known. They concern first the area of energy: the generation of the use of coal (Graissenne mines), the implementation of gas (1865) for lighting and domestic and industrial needs. Soon, but Jean Gailhac will be dead, electricity: from 1900.

The most important revolution will be that of transport with the establishment of the railways:

1857 construction of the Bordeaux - Latte line (station and bridge over the Orb)

1880 construction of lines

1885 the construction of the line "from the

Thus a whole network is set up to send large quantities of wine to the Massif Central, Paris and the North.

Similar to the railway, we must add the construction of the Canal Bridge at Béziers (1857) which removed the last obstacle to navigation on the Canal du Midi and also allowed a better flow of goods. (Unfortunately for the canal, it is the point when it passes to the control of the Compagnie des Chemins de fer du Midi which favours the rail at the expense of the canal).

And we must not forget the Tramway (especially the Béziers-Valras line) first with steam, then horse-drawn, finally with electric traction which will allow many Biterrois to enjoy the beach and the sea.

Finally, the establishment of banking structures: the branch of the Banque de France, that of Crédit Lyonnais, of Société Générale which will give viticulture their financial support.

For it is the development and transformation of viticulture that constitute the great economic action of Béziers. This is a three-fold evolution: the transition from Mediterranean agriculture (wheat, vines, olive trees, sheep farming, some crops, etc.) to monoculture vines. Two examples: until 1876 Béziers was a large cattle market.

In 1824 wheat occupies half of the space for cultivation. In 1885, the vine occupies two thirds of the space. Subsequently; the passage from a viticulture which, apart from some fine wines known as Muscat, feeding into so-called “boiler” wines – the distilleries to produce alcohols – to a viticulture producing wines for ongoing consumption, easily exportable by railroad. Finally comes the vineyard of mass production as can be seen from the following figure stated for the Béziers area:

1830	1.5 million hectolitres
1880	4.2 million hectolitres
1900	6.3 million hectolitres

This evolution, which actually began in 1770 (cf. Arthur Young: **WORKS OF ABBE ROZIER ON EXPERIMENTAL VINEYARDS**

was in progress during the “Monarchy of July” with the creation of by-roads and during the triumph of the Second Empire with the creation of railroads, industrialization; urbanization and elevation of life style. Certainly some difficulties and crises occur, principally technical and due to parasites; oidium (1845) overcome by stumming which was set in place in 1854, mildew, defeated by treatment with copper sulphate (as recommended by the school of agriculture of Montpellier in 188) and finally phylloxera, the parasite that attacks the roots of the vinestock and makes them die.

This last crisis that raged in the Midi from 1865 – 1880, to a certain extent made the fortune of the Biterrois and the Narbonnais because both these areas ere the last to be touched by it – toward 1880. They had well sold their wine because the harvest had greatly diminished on the East of the river Herault and when the harm reached their territory the remedy was known, namely: graft some “voini ferats” onto the American graft carriers (les porte –greffe Americans). They were thus able to rapidly and quite easily reconstitute their vineyards. From that point followed, until 1905; a good twenty years of strong prosperity – the golden age of viticulture – which apart from the crisis of overproduction of 1907, continued until the great depression of 1930.

Industrialization happens essentially in the context of viticulture, upstream with fertilizer, equipment, products of treatment, and downstream: “tonnellerie,” expedition, transport, while traditional industries decline such as the tanning trade, tawing, textiles and pottery. At the end of the nineteenth century some significant industrial groups appear: Etienne Vernet ploughs, the nebulous Gailhard (lighting wagons wood, general warehouses and electricity), the society “La Littorale” makers of venological products.

What then are the consequences ? Béziers draws great profit from this new economic situation and becomes an important wine market. A traveller at the very beginning of the twentieth century writes. “In Béziers everything is centered around wines the commerce of which is the unique concern of the town.” So Béziers at that time appeared as a rich town a showcase and veritable expression of a

prosperous viticulture: in 1903 the branch of the Banque de France in Béziers come 33rd out of 126 for turnovers. In other words Béziers has established her economic domination over the entire Biterrois area. At the same time this prosperity attracts people coming from elsewhere either for work connected with vines or for the needs of the town itself.

Subsequent to the numerical increase of the populace, the second aspect of social transformation of the town in the nineteenth century concerns the area taken up by the town, which doubles what it was previously. This corresponds to the noticeable increase of the population contemporaneously with the integration of technical progress; water adduction (1827), sewers, paving of the streets, distribution of gas.

In 1800, the town still enclosed in its ramparts, scarcely passes beyond the promenade (Allees Paul Riquet) with some very few exceptions. In 1827, the ramparts are demolished and the town salvages a great part by selling the stones as well as the space previously occupied by the fortifications, which it will dedicate to a project of adduction of water by pipelines.

In 1900, the built-up area links with Boulevard de Genève, Boulevard Duguesclin; Champ de Mars, the former Gare du Nord (Post and Telegraph area) rue Sergent Bobillot and beyond Font-Neuve and the country district. The modern Arènes (Bull-ring), built in 1897 were at that time completely in the country.

The urban space starts with the opening in the old sections of the Rue de la République and Rue Nationale (avenue Alphonse Mas) in order to respond to the necessities of circulation and of hygiene across the blocks of reputedly unhealthy houses. The town space is by now occupied by blocks of buildings constructed according to a utilitarian model: station; covered market, bridges, theatre (1844) new arenas (1897) –subsequent to temporary collapsible arenas at several points in the town and also educational sites such as the “*école pratique*” (today the Chamber of Commerce) and the reconstruction of the Boys’ College (today’s Lycée Henri IV).

The Allées Paul Riquet are a good example of the new town which arose in the wake of viticole prosperity. The planning of them had been in the making over a long period of time and was vigorously taken up again under the Second Empire (1838). The Jardin des Poètes (1875) lengthen the Allées, turning them into an area for daily leisure by reason of numerous cafés (44 by 1910) as well as a “shop front” expression of viticole prosperity, including the installation of banks and Friday wine-markets.

The augmentation of the population and the increase of built-up area entail a differentiation of districts. The old town still conserves a mixture of social classes; bourgeois, artisans, business men, with some areas more marked than others, - rural districts such as Capnau and St. Aphrodise, old aristocratic families around the Madeleine and the Cathedral, artisans in the area of St. Jacques; whereas the newer districts are more clearly differentiated; railway workers live close to the station on rue Gambetta and rue du Midi; artisans and farm workers in the areas of rue Foch and rue Albert I; habitat of lower middle-class and working class beyond the Allées which, like Avenue St. Saens and rue de la République, remain the zone of the middle class comprising the addition of layers of new middle-class.

Thus, at the close of the Nineteenth Century, Béziers has all the appearance of a prosperous town which has grown rapidly: a large wine-market, a center of commerce and its contingent services with some attempts at industrialization underscored by the high number of landlords of apartment buildings or of taxes (2055) and in contrast to the number of domestics (12% of the active population).

Breaking point is reached between the middle classes – the “new barbarians” according to Canon Durraud, pastor of the Cathedral – and religion. In fact, many ministers of the Church openly supported the part of order and therefore repression. In spite of economic progress and the generalized enrichment of the second empire, Béziers votes “no” by majority in the plebiscite of 1870 – which was intended to confirm the regime of Napoleon III.

From the beginning of the Empire – September 1870 – the Perreal municipality rallies to the Republic; Béziers votes republican in the legislative elections, while Herault votes conservative. The municipal council declares itself favourable to the commune of Paris. On three occasions at the beginning of the Third Republic; 1873, 75, 77, the conservative government dissolves the municipal council of Béziers, but at each new consultation, the candidate of the republican opposition is the winner. The republican majority, little by little slides into radicalism. In 1891 the radical Laferre becomes depute – and will remain in position until 1924; he is furthermore, a Masonic dignitary who will become eventually become Master of the “Grand Orient of France.”

From then on; the political anticlericalism of the municipality can be expected, while in the view of many, the Church has compromised itself with the partisans of the party of order; monarchists, bonapartists or moderate republicans. This is the application of the principle: “a good republican cannot be cabotin,” which explains the measures taken.

1871 lay teachers replace the Christian Brothers in the schools

1872 a petition for lay schools collects 2000 signatures against
464 for religious instruction schools

1879 prohibition of processions in the town

1880 demolition of the statue of the Blessed Virgin in Place St. Felix

1884 renaming with republican names those streets that carried names of saints.

In summary as Jean Saignes remarks in the History of Béziers at the end of the nineteenth century, three major currents exist: a current of the right but a right divided and losing impetus; a republican current taking the form of radicalism all powerful and benefiting from the support of Masonic lodges, of the newspaper “L’ Union Republicaine,” of a conglomeration of sympathizing organizations – and finally a socialistic current more or less turning its back on the syndicalism of the working class. It is true that the majority of workers who had come to Béziers half a century earlier, farm workers, masons, employees, is in process of organizing itself in the light of

socialist ideas. From 1870 circles of employees already exist who are inspired by anarchism; in 1891 comes the creation of labour unions; 1903 sees the birth of the Federation of Agricultural Workers of the Midi who, to succeed in their claims, launch the great strikes of the beginning of the twentieth century.

The paradox which Louis Secondy will not fail to touch upon is that this town, officially and by majority, republican, radical and anti-clerical, possesses at the same time the most flourishing Catholic education of the department, a fact which places in question the religious mentalities of Béziers.

The religious mentalities do appear to be affected by the spirit of festivity and enjoyment proper to Béziers, which factor could distance some from religious practice. Indeed this impression, even if exaggerated, is deeply felt in Montpellier by the procurators general and even at the chancery office. It is also true that newly arrived immigrants lose the religious standards of their villages.

Jean Gailhac knew the town, its times, the times of change and sometimes difficulties. He will put his energy into seeking to understand, to unravel the problems and remedy them in the light of the gospel. His ministry as chaplain at the hospital makes him aware of the miseries of the most disadvantaged. It is not by chance that it is the prostitutes and the orphans who attracted his regard and his attention. If Abbé Martin was able to be the artisan of retrieval, Jean Gailhac showed how necessary it was for the Church to measure up to the needs of the time.

